

The cover art features a central illustration of a young man and woman in a dark, industrial setting. The man, with dark hair and a determined expression, wears a black and red armored coat with a fur collar. He is holding the woman, who has short white hair and red eyes. She wears a white and black outfit with tribal-like patterns and a headband. In the background, a large, faint profile of a man with red eyes is visible. The title 'BERSERK' is written in large, bold, red letters with a white outline, and 'OF GLUTTONY' is in smaller white letters below it. The word 'NOVEL' is in small white letters above 'VII', which is in large red letters. The background is dark with green glowing particles and a large sword hilt at the bottom.

BERSERK

OF GLUTTONY

NOVEL

VII

Written by
Isshiki Ichika
Illustrated by fame



The cover art features a male character with dark hair and a fur-lined black coat with red accents, holding a female character with short white hair and red eyes. She wears a white and black outfit with tribal patterns. In the background, a large, semi-transparent profile of a character with red eyes is visible. The scene is set against a dark, industrial-looking background with green glowing particles. A large, dark, serrated blade is positioned horizontally across the middle, behind the title.

BERSERK OF GLUTTONY

NOVEL

VII

Written by
Isshiki Ichika
Illustrated by fame

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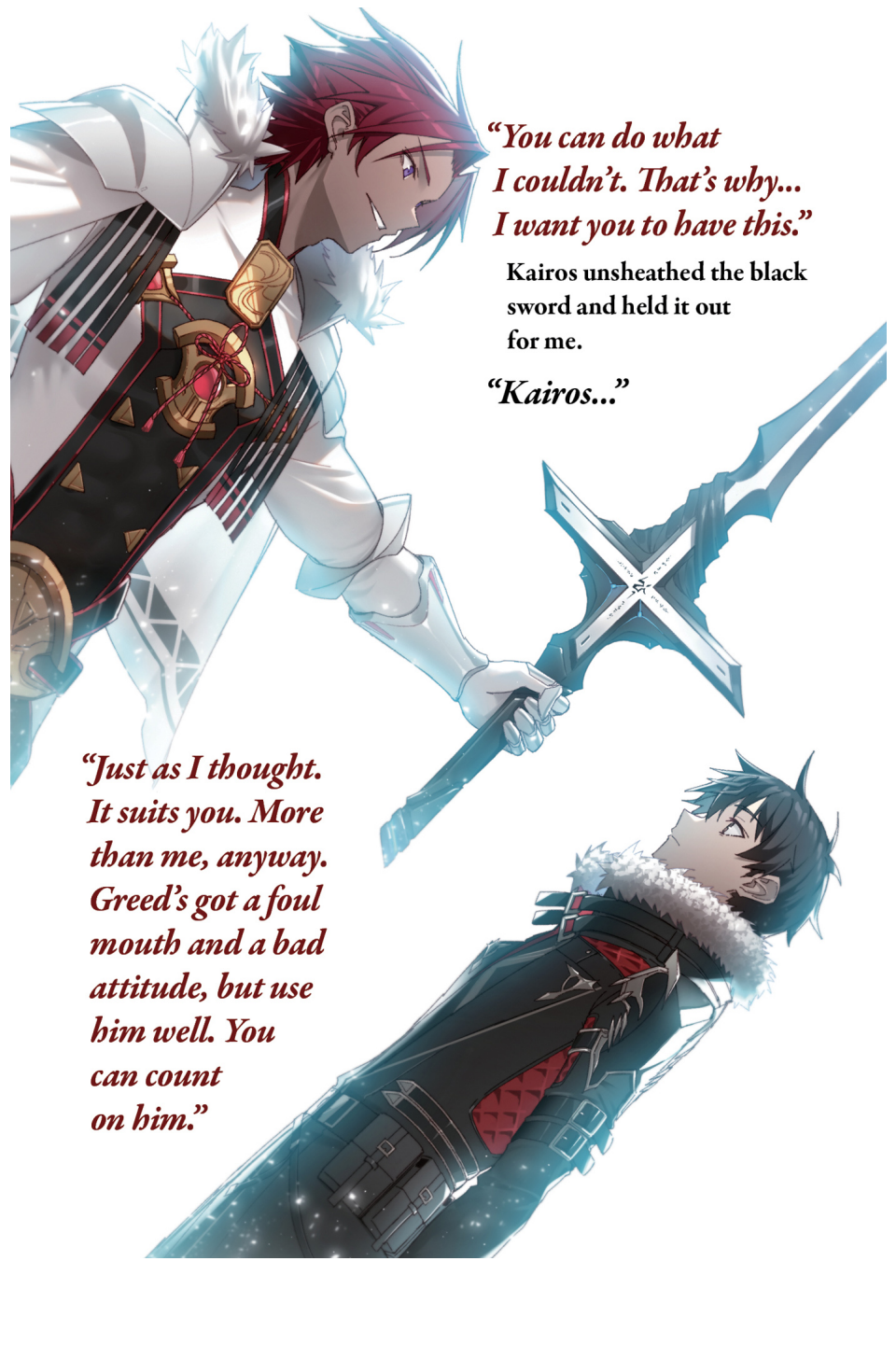
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*"You can do what
I couldn't. That's why...
I want you to have this."*

Kairos unsheathed the black sword and held it out for me.

"Kairos..."

*"Just as I thought.
It suits you. More
than me, anyway.
Greed's got a foul
mouth and a bad
attitude, but use
him well. You
can count
on him."*

BERSERK OF GLUTTONY

NOVEL

VII

WRITTEN BY
ISSHIKI ICHIKA

ILLUSTRATED BY
FAME



Seven Seas Entertainment

BOSHOKU NO BERUSERUKU
-OREDAKE LEVEL TO IU GAINEN WO TOPPA SURU - VOL. 7

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Illustrations by fame

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Chapter 1: Hausen, Restored

HAUSEN LAY BEFORE US. Once little more than a monster-infested ruin, the former city was transformed with the help of ancient technologies from the kingdom. It looked nothing like the place I had left.

Without thinking, I poured more power into the magic bike. I couldn't help myself—I wanted to see Hausen as soon as possible. I wanted to return to my home.

"Fay, you're so restless. You must be glad to be back," said Roxy, sitting behind me on the bike.

I couldn't help but smile. "Yes. This is my hometown, after all."

"I want to go, too!" an energetic voice piped up. "Faster! Faster!"

It came from Snow, the little one sitting in front of me. Although she had the body of a young girl, she was not, in fact, a human. She was one of the holy beasts, bearers of great power. The Door to Distant Lands had returned her to life and wiped her memories. Without them, she had developed a personality and voice suited to her new body.

At first, Snow had been awfully shy, only warming up to Memil, but her hardened expression had softened with time, and she'd come to smile more often. She was opening up to those around her, too. Well, everyone except Roxy. Snow still kept her distance from her.

My father had some sort of connection to Snow, some shared experience in the past. I didn't know the details, but I realized this was obviously the case when Snow went berserk and my father tried to kill her. That was the first time I'd ever seen murderous intent in his eyes. Even from my earliest memories, I'd never before witnessed such a terrifying expression contort my father's face. It was a side of him that I did not know. I had told Aaron that if I ended up fighting my father one day, I would face him head-on, but some part of me still felt trepidation.

Whether Snow understood my feelings or not, she was insistent on getting to Hausen as quickly as possible. Her naivety seemed to be the core of her being.

“I hear you, Snow,” I said. “Relax; I can’t steer if you don’t settle down!”

“But I want to go now! So! Let’s. Do. This!”

“Huh?!”

Snow placed her hands over mine and gripped the handlebars to instantly pour her magical energy into the bike. The magitech motorcycle peeled out as it converted her energy into raw speed.

“Fay! That’s too fast! Much too fa—whooooaaa!”

“This is bad! So bad!”

“This is fun!” cried Snow.

“It is not!” Roxy and I shouted together.

I pulled Snow’s hands off the handlebars, but it was too late. We were flying by at an extraordinary speed. If I slammed on the brakes, I’d only send the bike hurtling into a crash, but if I didn’t find a way to slow us down, we’d crash right into Hausen. Then we’d be looking at a second restoration project. As the lord of Hausen, I just couldn’t let myself be the cause of the city’s second destruction!

“Roxy, I’m sorry, but I have to—” I started.

“It’s okay. I know.”

Instead of crashing into Hausen, I swerved and drove past it. I already knew that Eris and Memil, who were following on their own bike, were watching us and wondering what the hell we were doing. I also knew that when we did arrive at Hausen, Eris would have a few choice words for me. Then again, she *was* the queen of the entire kingdom, so I supposed it would be an honor to receive such a verbal thrashing.

Those thoughts flew through my mind as our bike careened past Hausen.

“So long, Hausen...” I muttered.

“There’s no need to sound so dejected, Fay! We can head back as soon as we slow down. No telling what Eris will say, however.”

“What a coincidence. I was thinking the exact same thing.”

“So lighthearted for someone who might have their head on the chopping block!” Roxy gripped my cheeks from behind. Snow looked at

my contorted face and burst into laughter. “Your weird face got weirder!”

“What?!”

Was she implying that my face was weird to begin with?

“Roxy, do I... Is my face weird?”

“Anyway,” Roxy cut me off. “Let’s leave it at that for now, shall we? We should slow down and turn back toward Hausen.”

Roxy urged us onward without answering my question. When we finally reached Hausen, I was still thinking about it.

Eris and Memil awaited us at the main gates, standing next to their magic bike when we reached them.

“What is this?!” Memil cried. “Thought you could just go off on a joyride and abandon us again?!”

“No, Memil,” said Eris. “I dare say they were planning to abandon Hausen to find a more private nook.”

I dismounted the bike. “That doesn’t make any sense! In her excitement, Snow sent us hurtling toward the city. Surely you saw some of that from behind!”

Eris laughed. “You’re so funny when you’re flustered, Fate.”

“He is, isn’t he, Your Majesty?” added Memil.

“Give me a break, you two,” I muttered.

I couldn’t believe the two of them derived so much pleasure from my discomfort. It was a rough life, traveling in the company of girls like this. Then a comforting hand clapped me on the shoulder.

“Long time no see, Fate.”

“Set!”

I turned to find him standing behind me. He’d put on a little weight since I last saw him.

Next to him, his daughter Anne looked up at me and grinned. “Fate! Welcome back!”

“I’m home!” I replied.

Anne jumped toward me and wrapped me in a hug. I felt a pair of eyes studying the scene as it unfolded. It was Snow.

“Me too! Me too! Fate! Welcome back!” she cried.

“What are you doing, Snow?! We came here together!”

But Snow was too wrapped up in imitating Anne to listen. “Say it, Fate! Say you’re home!”

“I’m...home...”

Watching me wilt from the girls’ demands with a bemused expression, Set asked, “So this girl... She’s your daughter?”

“Does she look like my daughter? Of course not.”

“You’re right. She looks like she’ll grow up to be a true beauty—absolutely nothing like you.”

“I don’t like what you’re implying there...”

Set looked at me and at Snow, and scratched his head. “So whose child is she, then?”

Roxy smiled at Snow, then turned to Set. “We picked her up at the Desert of Extinction.”

“Oh, Lady Roxy! Why, I’m honored that you would grace us with your presence! Welcome to Hausen!”

“There’s no need for such formalities. Please, be at ease. I’ve given up my rank as head of my family, so please just treat me like any other adventurer.”

“No, no, I could never. Not when the renowned Roxy Hart herself has favored our lands with this visit!”

Completely forgetting about Snow, Set’s face flushed as he fidgeted nervously before Roxy. It was only natural to act this way when speaking to someone so beautiful. Not so long ago, I had been no different.

The somewhat disgruntled queen made her presence known by stepping on Set’s foot. “I’ll have you know, Set, you’ve got guts, ignoring my arrival after all the work I did to get here.”

“Your Majesty! I can assure you it’s not like that at all!”

“Not like what? Have you forgotten who you’re speaking to?”

“Please accept my humblest apology!”

Set prostrated himself before Eris, practically launching himself at her feet. The arrogant Eris seemed to take great joy in the moment.

Anne and Snow released me from their hugs and watched. I didn't like thinking about the lessons they might take from this. It wasn't good for Anne to watch her father grovel before the queen.

"Let's set aside the apologies and enter the city," I said.

"What? But I still haven't fini—"

"Yes, you have!" I took Eris by the arm and headed through the gates. "Roxy, Memil, let's go. You too, Set. We've got a lot to discuss."

"W-wait a second! Anne, come on! You too, Snow! This way," said Set.

We left the magic bikes with the soldiers at the gates, who would park them somewhere safe, then walked toward the most stunning site in all of Hausen: Castle Barbatos. Once, it had been a crumbling ruin where Aaron and I faced off against a crowned beast, the lich lord known as the Genesis of Death. Now it was unrecognizable. Its exquisite, limewashed white walls were a landmark in Hausen.

The main street was filled with the bustle of people coming and going. It was hard to believe that not so long ago, only skeletons had wandered these avenues. Even without hearing Set's reports on the state of our forsaken immigration plans, I could tell things were going smoothly.

Chapter 2: Castle Barbatos

WE PASSED THROUGH ornate gates into the castle courtyard. I wanted to watch the busy streets for a little longer, but there was something I wanted to check. Walking on, I gazed at the carefully manicured trees.

Set grinned, realizing what I was looking for. “The tree you planted is doing great, Fate.”

“Really?”

We took a short detour to look at the tree I had planted near the castle fountain.

“Whoa! But it was so small when I planted it! Is this really the same sapling?”

“It is,” said Set. “Honestly, I can’t believe it myself.”

Roxy couldn’t hide her surprise. “But this is a full-grown tree! Based on the size and appearance...it would typically take at least ten years to grow this large.”

Memil stood off to the side, her eyes full of skepticism and distrust. “This can’t possibly be true. As far as jokes go, this one is pretty bad, Fate.”

“Why would I lie about this, Memil? I swear, when I planted it, the tree was just a sapling!” I protested. *I’m your brother! Trust me! Quit looking at me like that!*

“Set, you’ll vouch for me, right?” I implored him. “I’m telling the truth.”

“He really is,” Set said. “I don’t know how it happened, but when Fate left Hausen, the tree, well, grew. And quicker than any of us could’ve imagined.”

Set’s words didn’t quite convince Memil and Roxy, but Eris and Snow had a different reaction altogether. They stood rooted in place, staring at the tree.

“Wow!” said Snow as she suddenly leapt at the tree trunk. “I can

feel Fate's power!"

"What do you mean, Snow?"

But my voice didn't reach Snow; she clung to the tree like a grasshopper, her eyes closed in comfort. I reached out to peel her away when Eris spoke.

"Ah, that's it. She's right." Eris gently placed a hand against the tree trunk, as though she were drawing a sensation from it.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You've put something of yourself in this tree, Fate."

A shiver ran up my spine. Until now, I'd assumed that I could only change people. "Wait, you're not saying..."

"I don't want to believe it's true either," said Eris, "but it looks like it's exactly what you're thinking."

If Eris was correct, then it meant that the power of my Gluttony even extended into plant life.

"You're...special."

"Special? You don't have this kind of power, Eris?"

"I don't. The only things I could change with my power were my two white knights. What you did with this plant? It's beyond me."

"But...is this okay?"

When I planted the sapling, I had simply wanted it to grow bigger. Had it responded to that feeling somehow, through the power of my Gluttony? Was my Gluttony growing even stronger than I thought possible?

"At the moment, I can't say either way," said Eris. "And it's not like this tree has a mind. It's just growing. It doesn't look like it's going to hurt anyone."

I sighed with relief and Eris continued.

"But that's just for the time being. From now on, I don't think it would be wise to put such strong emotions into anything else. If something else acted with as much wild abandon as this tree, it could cause trouble, no?"

"Yeah, that makes sense." But as I thought back, I murmured, "Did I really make that strong a wish back then...?"

Was this the true power of a skill of Mortal Sin? I couldn't come to grips with the idea that I was able to do something that Eris couldn't. Nevertheless, I couldn't argue with the evidence before my eyes, and like Eris said, it seemed best to avoid wishing for things with such fervor.

Roxy watched me with some worry, but quickly changed her expression. "It reminds me of back when you wanted to become a gardener, Fay. If you use this power well, you'll be able to create the garden you've always dreamed of."

"Yeah, I guess that's a silver lining."

"Indeed! Don't forget the Hart family also sent you all those seedlings for a grape vineyard. You'll be able to grow them in no time."

"Well, that would be nice, wouldn't it?" Memil jumped into the conversation with a grin. "I really can't wait to taste wine from the Hausen vineyards! Wine is so delicious, and so bloodred!"

Memil stared longingly at my neck and licked her lips. I quickly covered my neck with my hands and hid behind Roxy.

"Memil! That's more than enough of that! And don't forget I'm standing guard tonight," said Roxy.

"What?! Oh, but...that's the one thing I always look forward to..." Memil sulked.

"Tough times," said Eris, putting a hand on Memil's shoulder. "Looks like you're going to have to find a new hobby."

Roxy gripped Eris's hand with a little flash of anger. "I'll be keeping an eye out for you too, Eris. You're the queen of this country. How can you sleep so brazenly next to Fate in...*that*...manner?"

"Hmmm? Well, I *am* the bearer of the Lust skill, so I often find myself with an insatiable need for human touch. You know, skin-on-skin contact? Like this!"

I was only listening, staying out of it, but Eris suddenly wrapped her arms around me, her huge chest pressing against me. I was so surprised that I yelped. "Huh?!"

As Roxy tried to pry me loose, she shouted, "What are you doing, Eris?! This is exactly why I have to protect him!"

However, she was dealing with someone in the Domain of E. Eris

would not be dislodged so easily. I knew that saying anything in this situation would only add fuel to the fire, so I kept my mouth shut. This was an important lesson I had learned while traveling with this particular group of girls.

With her arms wrapped tight around me, Eris looked at Roxy's chest with a sardonic smile. "Oh, I see what this is about. Hm...I see *exactly* what this is about."

"Wh-wh-what?!" Roxy could sense where Eris's gaze lingered, and she crossed her arms, covering her chest.

"You're jealous that you can't do it like I can," said Eris.

"Wh-what are you talking about?!"

"Calm down, calm down. There's still hope for you yet."

I didn't know if Eris was trying to console Roxy, as it clearly sounded like Eris was looking down on her. This wasn't the sort of thing that had winners and losers, but...Roxy looked so sad as she turned away.

What can I say to make her feel better? I was still so inexperienced when it came to these situations, and I couldn't find the right words.

Instead, I flicked Eris's forehead and gave her a piece of my mind. "You know, I wish you would exercise your authority in more useful ways, Eris."

"Oh? Did I make you angry, Fate?"

"We're done here. Let's head to the castle. Now."

"Fine, fine." Eris released me and sauntered to the castle by herself.

She's definitely a handful, I thought. Now I had to catch Snow, who was running around the tree.

Meanwhile, Memil walked over to the disheartened Roxy. "Chin up! Let's go, Roxy!"

"Okay..."

"Come now, there's no need to mope just because your chest is a little on the small side!" added Memil.

"Please don't crow so loudly that the whole world can hear! You don't understand my feelings in the slightest!" With tears in her eyes,

Roxy ran toward the castle.

“Oh? Roxy! Roxy, please wait!” Memil cried and chased after her.

Those two are also a handful, I thought as I took hold of Snow.

“But I wanna play!” she protested.

“We can come back later,” I said. “Let’s go to the castle! You might find something even better to play with, you know?”

“Really? Okay! Let’s go!”

Snow was the youngest of them all, and maybe that was why she listened to me the most. Regardless, we all finally entered the castle. Set walked beside me, holding his daughter’s hand.

“You’ve got it tougher than I thought,” he said. “When you rolled into town with a group of beautiful women, I was jealous at first, but then...the more I thought about it, the more I realized that no ordinary man could handle the combination of two former holy knights and the queen.”

“So you understand my anguish, Set?”

“Sure do. I can’t do anything about it though, so best of luck,” Set said. He’d had a wife once, and this was his attempt to comfort me.

“What?! You won’t do anything to help me out?!”

“Of course not. I can’t risk my life like that, and I can’t let myself get dragged into the middle of that mess either. I’ve got a daughter to look after.”

“You think your life would be at stake? Well, they’re powerful women, that’s for sure.”

“That’s the heart of it, Fate. The world’s a different place for people like me, who aren’t adventurers. Everything rests on your shoulders. If Hausen falls because of some lovers’ quarrel before you rid the world of the incoming disaster, well, that’s no laughing matter. And, uh, could you tone it down a little when my daughter is around? I don’t think it’s a good influence.”

I felt the eyes of a caring parent bore into me. “Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind,” I promised.

Set was usually flexible and laidback, but when it came to his daughter, he was a different man. Even after I gave him my word, I still felt the pressure of his gaze, like he still didn’t quite trust me. It was a

shock; I really was trying to do the best I could with the girls in the party.

“Anyway, let’s hurry inside,” I said. “I’m worried about where Eris is going.”

“Given her personality, there’s really no telling what mischief she might get up to.”

“Let’s hurry it up.”

I distinctly remembered an impish grin on Eris’s face as she walked away. It was the face of a woman who was up to no good. I was suddenly gripped with the worry that I had left the door to my private quarters unlocked.

In that case, there was no time to lose!

Chapter 3: Fate's Room

MY WORST FEARS came to pass. As soon as I entered the castle, I searched for Eris in all the places she should have been, but she wasn't in any of them. I couldn't find Roxy or Memil either.

"Be serious. There's nowhere else they could be," said Greed, sensing my growing worry. *"Did you at least make sure to clean your room?"*

"I was in such a hurry to get to the kingdom. I didn't have time."

Surely the maids of the castle would have cleaned my room for me? When I got to the door to my room, I heard voices coming from inside—the voices of girls I knew all too well.

"Aha, so this is Fate's room?"

"We mustn't! Eris, please! We must leave immediately!"

"But we just got here, Roxy! This is where the real search begins, no? Wouldn't you say so, Memil?"

"Yes. As a maid at this very castle, it's a top priority."

"You heard her, Roxy. Perhaps you'd prefer to wait outside?"

"What? Why should I have to do that?"

Their voices grew louder, more animated.

I have to get inside! I have to stop them! I reached out to grasp the doorknob, but before I could open it, the voices continued.

"Besides, Roxy, aren't you curious about what Fate has hiding in his room?"

"Why, I would never pry..."

"Hmm... So why are you scrutinizing every detail of the room?"

"Well, I—?!"

The ever-courageous Roxy had tried to deter Eris from her evil ways, but there she was, flustered and faltering! Not only that, her reaction unleashed a flood of questions from Eris and Memil about Roxy and me.

Why do you guys have to have this conversation in my room? I bemoaned silently. “I feel like it’d be awkward if I went in at this point...”

“You’re pathetic,” said Greed. *“You should’ve kicked the door in the moment we arrived. I can’t believe you. You call yourself the wielder of the mighty Greed?!”*

“Sh-shut up!”

I couldn’t enter now! The timing was all wrong. I was stranded outside my own room; anyone who saw me would’ve been perplexed. As if in confirmation, the maids shot me curious glances as they passed by. I was their lord, returning after a long absence, and yet I looked so nervous and troubled that none of them said a word to me. They probably felt it was best to do it later.

“That’s enough dawdling. How about we just barge in already?” said Greed.

“Okay, okay.”

I pushed the door open. The girls inside turned to me in unison, their rowdy conversation suddenly interrupted.

“Well, well, speak of the devil,” said Eris.

“Fate, what’s wrong?” asked Memil.

“What’s wrong? This is *my* room.”

“Oh, is it? I had no idea.”

“Don’t play dumb with me.”

Eris and Memil stood shameless before me. They had essentially broken into my room to root through my belongings, and they didn’t care a bit. In contrast, Roxy’s face was turning deeper shades of red.

“Fay, I don’t suppose you overheard anything, did you?”

“I did...”

“Oh, my...”

Roxy couldn’t look me in the eyes, and she fled from the room before I had a chance to stop her. I looked at the open door as Eris clapped her hand on my shoulder. She looked at me like she had absolutely nothing to do with what had just transpired.

“It’s not nice to eavesdrop,” she said.

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from.”

“Whatever could you mean?”

“You went into my room without even asking for permission!”

“I don’t see the problem.”

Where’s the logic to your actions?! This is my room!

Eris didn’t show a shred of remorse as she sat down on my bed like it belonged to her. “Oh, this is quite nice, isn’t it? I’m going to sleep like a baby tonight.”

“Eris, you don’t mean...”

Eris laughed. “Oh, but I do! For someone so slow, you can sometimes be quite quick on the uptake, Fate. Don’t you think so, Memil?”

Memil nodded. “You said it.”

It looked like Memil had grown closer to the queen on the way to Hausen. She was practically in Eris’s pocket now.

“Oh, give me a break,” I said.

Roxy had said she’d keep me secure through the night, but at this rate I could easily see Eris and Roxy arguing while on top of my bed. I was beginning to think I wouldn’t get a wink of sleep.

“What’s wrong, Fate? You’ve gone pale.”

“Oh dear, this is very bad,” said Memil. “I’ll have to stay here all night to nurse you back to health.”

“Get out of my room! If I look pale or tired, it’s because of you two!”

“What?!”

Eris and Memil both gave me a flat look, but if anything, *I* was the one who should have looked like that! I turned the girls around and pushed them to the door in an attempt to get rid of them.

At that moment, an energetic voice boomed through the air, accompanied by a destructive din. “Fate! I found you! I wanna play too!”

“My room!”

Snow burst in, using her overwhelming excess of stats to blow the

door off its hinges. It grazed my cheek before it crashed through the window opposite and vanished into the distance.

I couldn't believe my eyes. It hadn't even been a day and I couldn't sleep in my own room anymore. I was nonplussed. Eris and Memil looked at me sympathetically.

Then Eris laughed. "Well, at least you can enjoy the pleasant breeze. Anyway, I'd better head to the guest rooms."

"I will bring a broom and dustpan," added Memil.

The two of them hurried out, leaving me alone with Snow. Finally, I had some peace and quiet, though it had come at a great cost.

"Snow," I said, "you shouldn't break doors down like that. I told you that before when you busted through the walls in the bath."

"Oh! I forgot... Sorry."

She was so absentminded! We'd spent so much time restoring the castle, and her thoughtlessness threatened to destroy it. All the same, I couldn't stay angry looking at her dejected face. Whenever Snow got wrapped up in something, it was like she completely forgot everything else. At first, I wondered if it was related to her lost memories, but as I came to know her better, I realized it was just a part of her personality. If I got mad and told her not to break the door again, she'd just forget. Even though she was just a kid, she was in the Domain of E. I had to keep a really close eye on her.

"Fate! Fate! I wanna explore the castle!"

"I have to talk with Set. Can we explore the castle afterward?"

"I wanna do it now! Now! Right now!"

At this rate, any conversation I tried to have with Set would be interrupted by Snow's temper tantrums. My best course of action would be to give Snow a tour until she tired herself out, then have her take a nap.

"Okay, let's explore the castle," I said.

"Yay! Hurry! Come on, let's go!"

We left through the gap that was once the door to my room. As we did, I noticed a lock of golden-blond hair disappear around the corner of the hallway. I motioned for Snow to be quiet, then snuck over. When the owner of the hair popped her head out to check on Snow and

me, I surprised her.

“Boo,” I said.

Roxy was trying to hide, only to find that I was standing almost beside her. Her reaction was stronger than I expected.

“Ahhhhh!” she screamed. “Don’t scare me like that, Fay!”

“What are you doing, hiding in the hall like this?” I asked.

Roxy wouldn’t look me in the eyes as she stammered, “W-well, about that... I was just worried because of Eris and Memil and what they might do. And then there was that terrible sound of the door breaking... Naturally, that made me even more worried.”

“Ah, that makes sense.”

A group of servants had also gathered nearby, drawn by the commotion, so I hastily explained the situation and asked them to arrange for someone to repair my door and window. Repairs looked like they would take a couple of days, based on the damage.

“I guess until my room is repaired, I’m sleeping in the guest rooms,” I said.

“That’s perfect. There just so happens to be a spare bed in my room, Fay.”

“Is it really okay for me to sleep in the same room as you?”

“Of course! If we leave Eris and Memil to their own devices, why, you’ll be in a world of trouble! You haven’t forgotten our agreement, right?”

“Hm? Agreement?”

“Your lessons, Fay. Your studies. I did tell you I was going to tutor you. Of course, a lot has happened since then and they fell by the wayside, but I’m certain we can make up for all that lost time!”

Lessons?! Studies?! I had completely forgotten. All of a sudden, I felt like I had no right to chastise Snow for her forgetfulness. My shoulders slumped at the thought of it all, and Snow began tugging on my sleeve.

“Castle! Exploring! Let’s! Go!”

“Okay, okay, I’m going, I’m going. Roxy, you want to come along?”

“Very well. But this evening we’re diving right into your studies, so you’d best be prepared.”

“Yes, Ms. Hart.”

“That’s the spirit! Who’s a good boy?!”

First, I had to show Roxy and Snow around the castle, then I had to meet with Set, and then I had to sit down with Roxy for a night of learning and studying. It was going to be a busy day.

Chapter 4: The Spiritual Plane

A WORLD OF WHITE stretched out before me. It was the familiar sight of the spiritual plane, an environment that Luna maintained for my sake. After talking with Set, I must have fallen asleep while Roxy was reviewing my lessons. Perhaps I was asleep right there at my desk. I hoped I hadn't caused Roxy any trouble. Regardless, I doubted I would wake up anytime soon.

"Luna?" I called.

There was no response, only a silence that enveloped me as completely as the featureless white expanse.

"Greed?"

The black sword was always around to help out with my training here, but he didn't answer either. There was no bitter, irate, or annoyed banter this time, only silence.

Had I somehow gotten myself trapped on the spiritual plane?

There's no way that could have happened...

This whole realm had been created by Luna to protect me from my Gluttony Skill. She had to be *somewhere*. I called her name, over and over, but she never showed.

"What the hell is going on here?"

This had never happened before. I stood still, wondering what to do. Looking down at my feet, I noticed my shadow. *That's weird*, I thought. *I shouldn't have a shadow in this place.*

"Why do I suddenly have one, then?"

I knelt down to touch it.

"Whoa! It moved out of the way!"

The shadow distorted, avoiding my touch. Not only that, it also untethered itself from my feet and congealed into a particular shape, as though it had a will of its own.

"You're..."

It was a figure I knew very well. I felt like I was staring into a mirror. But the apparition who gazed back at me was different in one terribly important way: his eyes were a crimson so intense that they made me flinch.



A crooked grin crept across the face of my shadow self, and he extended a hand toward me. A weapon the likes of which I had never seen appeared in his grasp. It was a sort of greatsword; the blade of the weapon extended down to the pommel, entirely hiding the grip. The pitch-black greatsword was designed purely for offense. It brought to mind the weapons of Mortal Sin: Greed, Sloth, and Envy.

There was no doubt about it—the shade faced me as a foe. In his eyes, I was a nuisance, a pest that needed to be eradicated. An unnatural hatred radiated from his core.

This is bad. Unarmed, I was at a massive disadvantage. That didn't stop the shade, who let loose a piercing battle cry as he closed in and attacked. I barely managed to evade the first strike, and the greatsword crashed into the pure-white floor to my side.

“Huh?!”

In an instant, a black darkness flowed out from the sword, tainting the once-white floor. Simultaneously, a searing pain wracked my body.

“How did you do that? *What* did you do?”

The shade did not answer. Instead, he swung his sword again. I was too close to dodge, and I didn't have a weapon to block or parry with either.

I'm a goner!

My boon companion appeared in my hands, wrapped in light. “Sorry I'm late!”

“Greed!” With a surge of confidence, I blocked the reflection's attack.

“Having a hard time, Fate?”

“Who the hell is this?!”

“You know who it is.”

I didn't reply. It was a creature born of my shadow, taking my shape as its own.

“It's you,” Greed continued. *“Another side of you, the side tainted by the Gluttony. It's become more powerful. Powerful enough to break into the world Luna created.”*

“You mean...”

“All this time, it lay in wait for the Gluttony to consume you. But now it has its own power, and it intends to consume you itself. Don’t forget what I told you: If you die here, your soul dies too.”

“So, if the shade kills me...”

“Then the Gluttony takes over, and it gets to run rampant in the waking world.”

I pushed the greatsword back. If I was beaten here, I’d go berserk and destroy Hausen with my own hands. I leaped backward, putting some distance between myself and the shade.

“Luna is losing control of the spiritual plane because of your Gluttony,” said Greed. *“She asked for my help and summoned me here, but we still have a real battle before us.”*

Greed had appeared in the form of the black sword, though he usually took a human form in the spiritual plane.

“That’s how powerful it has become,” said Greed. *“You know what this means, don’t you?”*

“It means I have to do something about it.”

“That’s my boy. Straight to the point.”

With this sword in hand, there was nothing that made me more confident, more ready. “Let’s go.”

“Here he comes.”

I parried the incoming blow from the shade, creating an opening. I put all of my strength into a riposte. The stroke should have cleaved the shade in two, but he twisted his body to avoid death. Nonetheless, one of his arms dropped at my feet. He couldn’t wield that greatsword with any finesse now.

For the first time since his flurry of slashes, the shade leaped back, attempting to retreat, but I wouldn’t let it escape so easily.

“Time to get serious.”

“There’s no limits here, Fate. You know what to do.”

“Let’s give him everything we’ve got.”

I transformed Greed into the black bow and readied the First Level secret technique, Bloody Ptarmigan. In the spiritual plane, I didn’t need to sacrifice my own stats, so I could launch the attack at full strength.

But I didn't stop there, I combined it with a tech-art, turning it into the Bloody Ptarmigan Cross. Normally, this would have been enough to kill me. It was a bold, reckless attack that meant sacrificing everything I had. I loosed two huge bolts of black lightning that helixed around each other as they flew toward their target.

The shade pierced the air with another shrill cry and tried to resist the attack, but the struggle was futile against such overwhelming might. In the aftermath, all that remained was a tattered scrap of shadow-stuff, struggling to cohere.

As I walked over to it, the shadow spoke for the first time: "You... are mine..."

I plunged my sword into the shadow as soon as I heard those words. I couldn't stand to see that face any longer. The shadow lost its shape, staining the white floor with darkness that slowly began to fade.

Greed's voice spoke from behind me. "Looks like you got the job done."

The black sword had disappeared from my hand. I turned to find Greed standing there, once more in human form. Luna stood by his side.

"I'm glad you took care of it," Luna said. "I was worried for a moment there."

"Now that I've beaten it, does that mean it won't come back?" I asked. The shadow's last words still rang in my head.

"No. It was born of your Gluttony, and as long as you bear the skill, you won't be able to escape it. It has yet to eat much of your soul, so you still have the upper hand. However..."

"At some point, the tables will turn," I said.

"They will," Luna confirmed. "With my power, I created this world, a barrier between you and your Gluttony. But your skill is overpowering me. I'm... I'm sorry..." From the look on Luna's face, I could tell that she had done everything in her power. She could help no more.

Greed put a hand on my shoulder. "But like she said, we still have time, and *you* still have the upper hand."

I nodded and turned to Luna. "Don't look so dejected. The only reason I've made it this far is because of your protection."

“Thank you, Fate.”

“No, I should be the one thanking you. Can I ask you something, though?”

“Go right ahead.”

“If Gluttony absorbs my soul, if it takes over...what happens to you?”

Luna grinned. “Then I plummet down there, into that eternal hell.”

The words flew from her mouth so casually that even Greed’s jaw dropped. This girl, Myne’s sister...was completely indifferent when it came to what might happen to her.

No matter what happened, I wouldn’t allow myself to lose to that shadow.

“Anyway, it’ll be morning soon,” she said. “It’s time for you to return to the real world, Fate. I’ll see to matters here and repair the areas damaged in battle.”

With those words, Luna sent me back to reality.

Chapter 5: Waking Up

“**G**OOD MORNING, FATE!”

That voice was so gentle on my ears. It was like a healing salve for the damage my heart and soul had endured on the spiritual plane. I opened my eyes slowly and saw Roxy’s face in the stream of light from the morning sun.

“Morning,” I said.

“You certainly slept well, didn’t you? I slapped your cheek a few times, but you didn’t wake at all. I don’t suppose it was all the learning last night, was it?”

“Well, half of it was...” I muttered.

“Why, you!”

Private lessons with Roxy... She was so strict that it was only natural I’d feel the way I did. Roxy demonstrated that she didn’t care for my blunt response with a flick to my forehead. Still, it didn’t hurt; it was as gentle as she was.

“Sorry.”

“No need for apologies,” said Roxy. “I dare say I might have gotten a little too excited yesterday. You learn quickly, Fate; these lessons will be very fruitful. Keep this up and you’ll take on important responsibilities in the castle in no time!”

I chuckled. “I don’t think I’m well suited to that kind of work.”

“Nonsense. You’re the lord of the Barbatos family. You should be more aware of your position as one of the five esteemed families! Besides, there’s nothing to worry about. I’ll be here to teach you every step of the way.”

Roxy was in high spirits, even this early in the morning. She pumped her fist in the air as she made her declaration.



“Please, just...don’t go too hard on me.”

Nobody in the world could stop Roxy when she got like this. I had a feeling that today’s studies would be even harder than yesterday’s. It was entirely possible that I’d wind up falling asleep at my desk again. That reminded me...

“Thanks for yesterday, Roxy,” I said.

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Well, I fell asleep at my desk, right? But I woke up in my bed. You carried me here, right?”

“Ah, that. I’m stronger than I look, you know.”

I knew that well. She was a holy knight, after all. It reminded me of my time as a servant of the Hart family. I had gone with Roxy to the city surrounding the castle because she wanted to observe the townspeople. When I had given her a piece of ore with a jewel inside of it, she’d cracked it open with her bare hands. She was even stronger than that too—she could take on powerful monsters solo if she had to. And she could have carried me with one hand. Just imagining her doing so made me chuckle.

“Speaking of which,” I said, “where did you sleep last night, Roxy?”

“Right here, of course.”

“What?! Right here?!”

“Indeed. You have no clue what an ordeal that was!”

“Wait, you don’t mean...”

The faces of Eris and Memil came to mind, both of them wearing mischievous grins.

“I mean *exactly* what you’re probably thinking. It was quite the fierce midnight battle, that much I can say with confidence.”

I looked around the room and saw that it was a mess. Everything was scattered around in complete disarray. Roxy saw me looking and hurriedly started tidying.

“My apologies. I never intended for your room to get so messy...” she said.

I started picking bric-a-brac off the floor and putting them back on

the shelves when I spotted a tail underneath them. It was a familiar tail, that of a scorpion. Grabbing and lifting it, I confirmed my suspicions: it belonged to Snow. She yawned and opened her eyes sleepily.

“G’morning!” she said.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Everybody was having so much fun. Snow wanted to join in.”

“That wasn’t fun! We weren’t playing around last night!” said Roxy.

According to Roxy, the previous night’s three-way battle royale had made for an extremely raucous time. Snow had somehow snuck in while it was happening.

“But you were asleep, Fate,” said Snow. “Nobody saw Snow. So I slept here.”

“So *that’s* how you got buried under all this stuff. It’s a wonder you never woke up...”

I gently pinched her cheek, then noticed Roxy looked like she wanted to say something.

“Uh, something on your mind?”

“You said it’s a wonder that she never woke up, but it’s a wonder that *you* didn’t either. I get that you were exhausted, but you didn’t even stir despite all the chaos.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s true,” I said with a laugh.

I had been trapped in the spiritual plane at the time, fighting my own shadow. There was no way I was going to wake up from that.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Fate?”

Roxy had her own problems to worry about. I didn’t want to burden her with mine, so I pretended everything was fine.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I was just tired. Totally worn out, I think.”

“Well, after what you went through on the way to Hausen, it’s only natural. Not to mention your father...”

“Dad... Under normal circumstances, his return would be cause for celebration.”

“I know how you feel, Fate. When my father returned, well... I

was happy, of course, but some part of me also suddenly wondered if it was really okay. When it comes to your father, there's still a lot about his actions that are completely inexplicable."

"He kidnapped Laine, and he stole the Philosopher's Stone too. He's just doing whatever he wants."

Roxy wagged a finger in front of me. "But don't forget, he also helped us back in the desert."

"Ah, yeah. He did."

Back in the desert, he had been just like the man I remembered. Nonetheless, he was trying to open the Door to Distant Lands, which made him our enemy.

"He has the same goal as Myne, so it's possible my father will also come to Hausen."

"On top of that, I'm also worried about that Libra character we met in the oasis."

When I'd spoken with Set the previous day, I'd told him to report to me if security noticed anyone resembling my father or Libra, but it wouldn't be easy. Now that repairs were in full swing and Hausen was developing so smoothly, lots of people were visiting and passing through. The city was too understaffed for dedicated investigations. The fact that they'd spotted someone who looked like Myne was little more than good luck.

Placing Snow on the bed, I continued cleaning until the room looked back to normal.

"That should do it," I said.

Roxy said, "Looks nice and clean. Well, Snow and I should get changed, so once you get dressed and equipped, let's have breakfast."

"Sounds good. Wait. Are you saying you're going to make me breakfast?"

Roxy giggled. "Of course!"

She hefted Snow under her arm and gave me a wink. She was confident, which meant I'd have to get my game face on and eat all my breakfast.

"See you soon, Fate," Roxy said.

"Bye-bye, Fate!" said Snow, waving energetically as Roxy carried

her off.

“See you both at breakfast.”

It seemed like Snow had grown more comfortable around Roxy on the way to Hausen. Roxy had even taken to calling her “Snowy” as of late. All that was left now was to get Snow and Eris on better terms, but...that was a completely different mountain to climb. I couldn’t help but think about that as Roxy and Snow left the room.

Snow was one of the holy beastfolk, a very special race. They had caused Eris to suffer terribly in the past, and Eris had some kind of connection to Libra in particular. The trauma was so bad that Snow simply being of the same race brought those painful memories flooding back. When Snow had leapt onto Eris to give her a hug last night, Eris had pretended to smile, but she’d broken out into a cold sweat. She never lost her cool, so I wondered how much of her trauma had resurfaced. Eris was usually so calm, collected, and easygoing. Would she really be able to fight Libra?

I dressed quickly and left the room with Greed in hand.

“*Rough night last night,*” he said.

“For a while there, I honestly had no idea what was going to happen.”

“*Well, Luna said she’d increase her defenses, so we’re at least safe for the next couple days.*”

“Glad to hear it. I don’t think I could handle that every night.”

Today’s plan was to have breakfast, then head into town. I wanted to visit the place where Myne had been spotted. It would also be a good opportunity to see how the city of Hausen was progressing.

Chapter 6: A City Developing

ROXY AND I purchased sweet pies and ate them as we toured the city.

“This is utterly delicious,” said Roxy.

“Yep!” added Snow. “Utterly delish!”

Roxy and Snow both had a sweet tooth. For that matter, Eris and Memil had also eaten their fair share of sugary treats on the way to Hausen. I wondered whether there was any truth to the cliché that all girls adored sweets and desserts.

“Hm? Do you not care for pies, Fay?” asked Roxy.

She had to have noticed my countenance, lost as I was in thought. If I could help it, I didn’t want her to fret over me.

“Sure, I like pies,” I said. “This red jam is great. Er...what’s the fruit called again?”

“Raspberries.”

When she realized that I’d forgotten their name, Roxy puffed up her cheeks with disappointment.

“Y-yeah, that’s it,” I stammered. “We, uh, we learned how to grow and harvest these along with grapes, and we owe that to the help of the Hart family.”

Greed cackled at me. It was so shrill and metallic that I gave him a good prodding.

“But we really do, Roxy,” I continued. “Because of the Hart family’s support, we’re growing grapes and raspberries on Hausen soil. We couldn’t have done it without you, and I’ll always be grateful.”

“Think nothing of it,” she said. “I didn’t do anything special. The people who truly deserve your gratitude are the townsfolk who came from the Hart estate to help.”

“Well, them too,” I said.

The vineyards were quite a distance from us, so I doubted that I

would have the opportunity to give them my thanks today. Regardless, I gave them silent thanks in my heart as I ate another mouthful of my raspberry pie.

Since arriving in Hausen, Roxy had been especially interested in learning the ways it differed from the lands of the Hart family.

“Fay, what’s that?” She pointed at a sign hanging from the wall of an inn.

Upon closer inspection, it was no ordinary sign. The arrow pointing toward the inn emitted light.

“The sign uses magitech,” I said. “It’s a paint that glows as a reaction to latent magical energy in the air.”

Those were Set’s exact words; I simply parroted them back to Roxy. He sent me letters whenever a new technology was implemented in Hausen. We gawked at the brightly lit sign for a short while, then Snow tugged at my hand.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“That guy is watching you,” said Snow.

“Huh?”

Roxy and I both turned to see where Snow was pointing. The owner of the inn approached us, rubbing his hands together.

“Looking for a place to stay?” he asked. “My inn is very affordable. We also have rooms prepared especially for young couples such as yourselves.”

“Huuhhh?!”

Our response was so vehement that it drew the attention of passersby. Roxy and I were both completely flabbergasted.

“My apologies!” said Roxy. “I did not mean to give you the wrong idea while I observed your fine and reputable establishment!”

She hurriedly grabbed my free hand and pulled me along as she walked away.

“Roxy!” I cried.

Once the inn was out of sight, Roxy grinned at me. “What a surprise! To think we’d be asked a thing like that on a morning like today...”

“Yeah. Do you think, maybe...we look like we’re dating?”

Roxy and I looked at each other for a time.

“We don’t have time for jokes, Fay!”

I hadn’t meant it as a joke, but Roxy still smiled and flicked my forehead.

“Right; we have to track down Myne. This is supposed to be the place where she was spotted, but—”

“There’s so many people!”

“People! So many people!” cried Snow.

We’d only moved one block over, but the atmosphere was completely different. Snow had never seen so many people in one place, and she was practically bursting with excitement. When I noticed her little scorpion tail darting out from her white robe, I hastened to calm her.

As one of the holy beastfolk, Snow differed from the rest of us. Though she had a human form, her tail betrayed her unique nature. I didn’t want to startle anyone or cause a panic, so I always reminded her to act human.

“Snow! Settle down!”

“No! I wanna play! Over there!”

Snow gawped at some street performers putting on a show. She didn’t grasp what they were doing and assumed that it was some sort of game.

“Snow! They’re not—they’re not playing a game!”

Snow let out a growl when I grabbed hold of her. “Grrr...”

She struggled to break free from my grip with an unbelievable amount of power. She was in the Domain of E, after all. If she were unleashed here in the city streets, there was no doubt what would happen next: she’d wreck her surroundings like a tiny, rampaging god of destruction. I flashed back to the desert and the tortuous battle with Snow when she was in the form of the Zodiac Scorpion.

Sensing an opening, Snow slipped from my grasp like an eel.

“Snow!”

“Ha ha!”

I had to stop her! She bolted straight at the street performers. Just as I lost all hope of resolving this situation peaceably, Roxy appeared and put something in Snow's mouth.

"Hm?" Snow mumbled, her mouth full.

"How is it, Snow?"

"Amazing!"

While I'd been preoccupied with trying to keep Snow under control, Roxy had gone to a nearby food stall and bought some fried buns on skewers. Snow was wholly engrossed with the flavor, and all thoughts of playing with the street performers vanished. Roxy's quick thinking had saved the street from catastrophe.

"Thanks, Roxy," I said as I picked Snow up by her collar. "You saved us."

"All in a day's work!" Roxy said proudly with her hands on her hips. "I've been studying how to best handle children, I'll have you know."

When I asked her for details, she told me her interest had begun when I was still only a servant at Hart Manor. We had gone out to observe the common folk in town and encountered a lost child who cried the moment Roxy tried to help. Since then, Roxy had secretly studied how to befriend children and make them feel at ease. Her success with Snow boosted her confidence greatly.

When Snow and Roxy first met each other, Snow had kept a firm distance from Roxy. The image of Roxy's slumped shoulders when Snow ran away from her flashed through my mind. They really were much closer now, and it was all due to Roxy's tenacity.

"Do you want another, Snowy? Here you go!"

"Wow!"

Are they really closer, or is she just bribing Snow with food?

Regardless, I was pleased to see Roxy beam with satisfaction. It was very much in her nature to doggedly pursue her goal. I was much more liable to panic and rush, so I was relieved to have someone like her by my side.

I watched the two of them for a time, then felt a piercing gaze behind me. I could tell it was focused on me because nobody else, not

even Roxy or Snow, had noticed it. Only someone with great control over their power could do such a thing.

“Greed,” I whispered. “Is that...?”

“It’s him, all right.”

We knew this gaze well. It was burned into our minds. It belonged to the man who had destroyed the monster known as the City Eater, which had once lived beneath an oasis. He had driven away the people who called that oasis home and left them rootless.

The City Eater lured its human prey by germinating a magnificently fertile land. The population drawn to this place multiplied until one day, in the far, far future, the City Eater would devour them all. Therefore, I couldn’t completely deplore the man’s actions.

Myne had told me about the City Eater when we first encountered it. She said that it would wait many hundreds of years before acting. There was still plenty of time for those people, time to explain the situation to them, and time to find a place for them to relocate and start anew. There was no need to kill the City Eater immediately.

But *he* didn’t care about the people or their livelihoods. In his eyes, there lay only a resolute drive to vanquish evil from this world, wherever and whenever he encountered it.

I turned on my heels to see him.

Libra smiled gently at me, but that smile didn’t touch his cold, unfeeling eyes. “Fate, we meet again.”

Libra was dressed in a priest’s vestments. As he approached, Roxy and Snow noticed him and grew wary.

“Oh, my apologies,” Libra said. “Do I frighten you?”

“What do you think? Did you imagine we’d forget what you did at the oasis?”

“Hm? The oasis? Ah, that. That was nothing. Besides, are you sure you have time to wander with so little urgency?” Libra stopped before me and leaned over to whisper in my ear. “If you don’t hurry to close the Door to Distant Lands, this place will suffer the same fate.”

Chapter 7: Libra's Invitation

I GLARED AT LIBRA. After what he'd just said, I couldn't keep silent.

"Not while I still draw breath," I snapped. "I'll never let you."

Libra remained unruffled. It was a detached coolness, like he existed on a higher plane of being—as if he looked down not just on me, but on all the people in Hausen.

"Now now, no need to upset yourself so. Although I seem to have drawn the ire of your friends too." Libra sighed. "Somehow I always end up being the bad guy..."

"What did you expect? You just threatened to destroy Hausen."

"Consider my perspective, and consider it carefully: If you could stop a crisis that threatened to engulf the entire world, would you not sacrifice Hausen to do so? In the grand scheme of things, that's not too high a price."

"Libra, you—"

"Indeed, haven't I afforded you time to handle matters? Have you still not found Myne?"

Libra was provoking me with his gaze, but the first to respond to him was Snow. Roxy panicked and tried to restrain her, but Snow would not be stopped. I tried to grab hold of her myself, but she evaded me and leapt at Libra.

"I hate you!" she shouted.

Snow didn't hold back in the slightest. She poured the entirety of her stats into a single attack. Despite that, Libra stopped her with ease. Even though he'd faced her attack directly, there wasn't a single sound of impact, nor the slightest shock wave from their clash.

"Seems like you've acquired some unnecessary emotions," said Libra. "Such a pity. However..."

Libra gripped Snow's head like a vise as the girl went wild trying to break free. I placed my hand on the hilt of my sword, but Libra spoke before I could unsheathe it.

"I don't intend to cause the girl any harm," he said. The hand that held Snow began to glow with a brilliant light. "I'm just returning a few of her lost memories, that's all. She'll be more useful that way."

Libra grinned and tossed the now silent Snow to me as if she were a lifeless rag doll.

"Snow?!"

I caught her in my arms and checked to see if she was all right. All I knew was that she still drew breath and had lost consciousness.

"You see? No injuries. We have a long, shared history, Snow and I. I know to treat her with proper courtesy." Libra's countenance remained calm and ostensibly amicable.

Roxy stepped between us. "You said you returned her memories. What did you mean by that?"

"Well, if it isn't the esteemed Roxy Hart herself." Libra shook his head. "Such a dangerous place isn't becoming for one of your station."

His words were glib, even sweet, but Roxy ignored them. "I know I'm not strong enough. But answer my question: What memories did you give Snow?"

"That's so very like you. Very well, I will answer your question. We've long had a soft spot for holy knights..."

Libra said the last part almost as if he were talking to himself. It was as though he hadn't intended to say anything to the rest of us, but he was, for some reason, willing to entertain Roxy's request.

"And if I don't tell you, you'll probably just be stuck here forever anyway," said Libra, once again flashing his crooked grin. "I gave Snow some of my own memories. Memories from long before Hausen was even built."

"From before... You mean...?"

"You're a shrewd one, aren't you? I'm grateful; it will make things quick. Yes, they're memories from the epoch when Galia had dominion over this world." Libra placed a finger on his forehead, then slowly pointed it toward Snow.

"Libra..."

He had just done something incredibly dangerous. I tried to grab him, but he nimbly evaded my grasp.

“Oh, what’s wrong, Fate?” he said with a smirk. “What’s gotten you so frightened?”

“You...!”

I glanced at Snow before returning my furious gaze to Libra.

“Ah, now I understand,” said Libra. “If Snow remembers who she was before she lost her memories, she may well become your foe. Though she’s in the Domain of E, her form is young and relatively harmless. But if she were to turn against you...who knows what might happen? Is that why your heart trembles with fear?”

I bit back my words.

Libra gave me a satisfied look. “I see. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Roxy couldn’t stand to just watch any longer. She took my hand. “He’s wrong! Even if she has lost her memories, this girl here is the real Snow. Our Snowy. Please believe in her.”

“Roxy, I’m sorry.”

Some part of me couldn’t forget my battle with Snow when she was still the Zodiac Scorpion. That part imagined that same monster tearing apart the city of Hausen, and it scared me, deep in my subconscious.

Libra read the uncertainty in my face. “Ultimately, the one who decides what happens is Snow. Do not forget that. The longer you live, the more the chains of your actions bind you. There are certain parts of the past from which nobody can escape.”

Libra, like Snow, was one of the holy beastfolk. And given what he’d just told us, both of them had been alive since the era when Galia flourished. I couldn’t be absolutely certain, but Myne had also likely lived through that era, so it was worth finding out what she knew. In any case, if Libra’s words were to be believed, he had either planted forgotten memories inside of Snow or he had made them resurface. The unknown variable, then, was how those memories would affect Snow’s perception of us, and what her next action would be.

Libra watched the sleeping Snow for a time, then turned his back and began to walk away. “One more thing: It’s your turn next. Failure will not be tolerated.”

“Libra...”

“Until then.”

Libra nonchalantly waved goodbye, then disappeared into the crowd of people. Only then did I feel free of the strange weight that had burdened me since he arrived.

It seemed Roxy felt the same thing. “Fay, did you notice the townspeople were...different when Libra was here?”

I hadn’t realized it at the time, but she was right. Even though we were near the main street, people went about their business. The situation with Libra was beyond volatile, yet the crowd around us had been completely oblivious. Libra had gripped Snow by the head, his hand glowing with light as he returned her memories, but no one nearby had responded in any way.

“Was that one of Libra’s skills?”

“I don’t know, Fay. The only way to know for sure is with your Identify skill...”

“Someone like him would stop it in its tracks.”

It was a technique Aaron had taught me. Whenever someone used the Identify skill, their eyes moved in a particular way. If you released a burst of magical energy simultaneously with that movement, it would temporarily blind the skill user. If you happened to be in the Domain of E, the excessive magical energy would be enough to cauterize their vision permanently.

“Well, the Identify skill gives you easy access to so much information,” I said. “I guess it’s like the saying: If it sounds too good to be true...”

“...It probably is,” finished Roxy. “And in this case, there’s a simple counter to it. It feels like Libra’s true power is unfathomable. First there was the way he stole the life out of the monster in the oasis, and now this.”

I was just as troubled as she was. Libra was always so calm and self-possessed that I could only wonder what would happen if he lost his temper. It was a terrifying unknown. He made us feel that his power was overwhelmingly greater than our own. It was like an aura that surrounded him.

We stood staring at the crowd into which Libra had vanished. As we did, Snow began to awaken. She had received the memories Libra

had given her. I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. Even though I wanted to trust her, I couldn't help but be on guard—because at that moment, Snow was bursting with all the magical energy that came with being in the Domain of E.

Chapter 8: Snow's Holy Seal

A RED TATTOO advanced across Snow's face—her sacred mark. I thought of what Libra had said back in Tetra, that the sacred mark was a revelation from God... Did that mean that the reawakened Snow was guided by divinity itself?!

"Fay!"

"Is this what Snow got back?" I asked Greed.

"Even I don't know what's happening, but you'd best ready the magic shield."

Greed's words brought me back to the present. I drew my sword, transformed it into the black shield, and stood in front of Roxy.

"The town..."

There was every chance that Snow would unleash the massive magical energy building within her. If that happened, it would be pure devastation, with us at its center. The magic emanating from her was exactly as I feared, and my vision seemed to fade before it. I realized that if I hadn't been behind the black shield, it could have easily rendered me unconscious.

"Are you okay?" I asked Roxy.

"This power is making me dizzy, but yes, I'm okay."

"Good," I said, looking around, "Seems like the city is fine too."

"Fay, look!"

I turned to look where Roxy was pointing to find a hole bored deep into the earth, straight through the beautiful stone paving. Peering down into it, I couldn't see the bottom.

"She must have gone down there," Roxy said.

"Into the subterranean depths beneath Hausen?"

"Is there any sort of structure down there—a basement or underground area?"

"Nothing that I know of, not besides the sewer system."

Aaron had once told me that Hausen had a thousand-year history. But he made no mention of underground depths when he outlined that history.

“It seems unlikely that she would simply burrow without reason.”

“The Galian's ruled these lands four thousand years ago,” I said. “I wonder...”

Roxy and I stared at each other, considering the possibility.

“Whatever the case may be, after Snow's burst of magical energy, we had better check to see if the people of Hausen are okay,” said Roxy.

“No need to worry; looks like backup has arrived,” I said, sensing their presence. “Hausen's city guards are a truly exceptional bunch. It'd be safe to say I rely on them a little too much.”

The captain of the arriving guards stepped out in front of the others to report. “My lord, we detected an unbelievable amount of magical energy. What was it?”

Before giving an explanation, I introduced Roxy to Baldo, the man whose party I had met in the Desert of Extinction when I saved them from the sand golem. Before Aaron's retirement, Baldo had been in the employ of my adoptive father; afterward, he and his friends formed a mercenary company that wandered the lands. When they heard that Hausen was being restored, they hurried back, and now they worked under my command to maintain peace within the city walls.

“Looks like you've got trustworthy people around you, Fay,” Roxy said with a smile.

I wondered if she'd thought that my only real companion was Greed... In any case, I was happy if she was happy. I summarized the situation for Baldo: Snow had awakened to herself. Baldo and his men were already tasked with keeping an eye out for Myne, so he immediately grasped that this was a related incident.

“In that case, my troops and I will manage the citizenry,” he said. “But what should we do about this Libra fellow?”

I shook my head and told Baldo to avoid getting entangled with Libra. He was too strong. If we did something to incur his wrath, he could change his plans in an instant. It was entirely possible that Libra was powerful enough to level Hausen if it suited his fancy. That was the degree to which his abilities were still unknown to us.

“We’ll start searching for Snow,” I said. “If the worst comes to pass, you’ll need to evacuate the citizens. I want you to report to Set and make preparations for that eventuality.”

Baldo’s eyebrows anxiously knit together. “Is the situation so dire?”

I nodded slowly. “You felt that magical surge. You know the answer to your question. That’s what we’re facing.”

“I thought I’d heard it all, but that magical power is well above my pay grade,” said Baldo with a wry chuckle. “Well then, we’re in quite the situation, aren’t we? We’ll start preparing immediately.”

Baldo turned to his troops and began to bark orders.

“Looks like the others have finally arrived,” I said.

Roxy noticed them as well. When Libra turned up, she had been unable to focus on anything besides him and Snow, but now that the situation had calmed down a bit, she had a chance to take in her surroundings. I was worried that Snow’s sudden transformation had unsettled her, but her inner strength proved that my fears were misplaced.

“Indeed,” Roxy said.

Eris arrived with her black gunblade hanging from her waist. She was prepared to do battle. Her sweet voice rang out, “My, oh my. And here I was, so sure that Snow would reveal her true colors...”

Eris still didn’t care for Snow—or rather, the holy beastfolk in general.

“This was Libra’s doing,” I said, gesturing at the hole in the ground. “He said he’d give us a hand in finding Myne, but then he did something to Snow. Her sacred mark became visible.”

“Ah, so that’s what happened. I don’t like this at all. He’s got us wrapped around his little finger.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“We don’t have a choice,” said Roxy. “We must follow Snowy.”

If Myne really was somewhere at the other end of this tunnel, the only way to find her would be to see where it led.

“Then let’s go!” said Eris. “Fate, you first!”

“Huh?! Me?”

“Of course. Better a tough young man than us delicate young maidens. Right, Roxy?”

“Er, Fate, if you don’t want to, I can go first.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s fine. I’ll go.”

Since I could use the Fireball spell to light our way through the darkness, it did make the most sense for me to take point.

“Just give me a sec,” I said. “I need to kindle a light for the dark—
NESSSSSSS!”

Eris took me surprise and kicked me down into the hole.

How heartless! Who does she think she is?!

In any case, Eris dived in soon after me, cackling. “Serves you right, Fate! You’ve been spending far too much time with Roxy. You need to reflect on your selfishness.”

“There’s a time and place for that!”

Eris was awful, but as a queen, I should have expected her to be somewhat tyrannical. I ignored Eris and cast Fireball. Then she grabbed me tightly as we fell through the air.

“What are you doing, Eris? I’ll never be able to land like this.”

“That’s true. Sucks to be you!”

“How can you be like that?!”

“Well, I’ll be fine. I have you to cushion the impact. That said, I *am* a little worried about how much of the impact you’ll actually absorb, given your sinewy thighs.”

I tried to squirm free, but Eris was serious. She gripped me so tightly that I couldn’t move at all.

“You’re joking, right?”

Eris laughed. “Sometimes a girl’s gotta get serious. Besides, you’re in the Domain of E.”

“That’s not an explanation! I’ll still have to take the impact of the fall!”

“Not to worry. If you get knocked out, I’ll simply nurse you back to health!”

Such selfishness! But there was truly no way to escape my destiny: I was Eris's cushion.

Fortunately, the fall didn't render me unconscious, but it did rattle me so much that I could only lay on the ground for some time.

"Well, let's get to it. Quit slacking, Fate. You disappoint me."

"Like you can talk after what you just did..."

"Want to know how you could stop me talking?" Eris leaned over my prone body and brought her lips ever closer to my face.

"Wha?!"

Eris loved putting me in a compromised position. Before she could do anything more, Roxy's shriek reverberated above us.

The hole was apparently much deeper than she'd expected. I hoped she'd be okay, but as soon as that thought crossed my mind, she landed right on top of me.

"Gahh—oof!"

"I-I'm sorry!" cried Roxy.

Eris laughed. "Serves you right!"

There I lay while Eris laughed above me and Roxy apologized profusely. I felt somewhat alarmed; this didn't seem like a good omen.

"I'm really so sorry, Fay! I didn't mean to land on you."

"It's all good," I said, my voice faint. "As long as you're safe, I don't mind."

"What?!" Eris said, taking offense. "You didn't say anything like that when *we* fell! You treat her like a princess and me like a pauper!"

"How about you reflect on the circumstances that led to you landing on me, then tell me if my response was undeserved?"

Eris took a moment to consider the situation, then she grinned. "It was your fault!"

"Eris..." I sighed. *Once a despot, always a despot, I guess.*

Roxy and I were at a complete loss over how to handle our queen.

Chapter 9:

Subterranean Hausen

EERIS ARROGANTLY PUFFED up her chest. “Oh, by the way, Memil wanted to come along too, but I told her to look after the castle. It was the right move, was it not?”

“I think that’s for the best,” I said.

Memil had the skills of a holy knight. However, the kingdom strictly forbade her from using those skills. In the past, she had broken that rule to aid me in my fight against the goblin shaman. It had been a dire emergency, but the consequences had been significant. In the end, Eris had to exercise her queenly prerogative to pardon Memil, but it was unlikely that Memil would get off so easily a second time. I hoped that she would never have to wield a holy sword again.

“That’s why I asked her to assist Set.”

“You made the right choice, Eris.”

Eris giggled. “A compliment from you means I just scored some major points, huh?”

It was amazing that she could be so carefree while we delved into the depths of a mysterious subterranean realm in search of Snow.

“Come on, Eris...” I muttered. “How can you be so nonchalant at a time like this?”

I cast Fireball to give us some light. Though I was fine in the darkness because I had the Night Vision skill, I had no inkling whether Eris and Roxy had similar skills. With the area bathed in light, Eris ran over to me for a hug.

“Just what we needed! I hate the way the world looks through Night Vision!”

“Yes, I know exactly what you mean,” said Roxy. “Much better with a real source of light.”

I stared at them wide-eyed. Their reactions suggested that they would have had no problems moving around in total darkness. When she saw my expression, Roxy chuckled, then took a small magical token

off her chest piece and showed it to me. It was no larger than the palm of her hand, and it had some sort of arcane sigil inscribed into it.

“This gives me a skill equivalent to Night Vision. It’s quite rare.”

According to Roxy, such accessories were sometimes discovered in the Galian region.

“Eris, you carry one of those as well?” I asked.

“No, I rely on the various arcane eyes implanted in me. Night Vision is one benefit.”

“Arcane eyes?”

“I should state up front that it’s *not* a Lust-related skill. In the distant past, the world was filled with monsters carrying arcane eyes. The genes of those eyes were implanted in me.”

I was just about to ask by whom, but an image of the likely culprit rose in my mind. He and Eris shared a deep connection, and he’d shown up here just recently.

“Was it Libra?” I asked.

“It was indeed. I wanted to tell you in Tetra... I was like a pet to him.”

“A pet...?”

Eris laughed bitterly. “Don’t look at me like that. As far as he’s concerned, humans are as inconsequential as pebbles on the side of the road.”

“Yeah, but...”

“I... The white knights and I, we are the same. We’re the only survivors. We look just like any other humans, but that resemblance is only skin deep. To put it mildly, Libra has a great interest in the skills of Mortal Sin.”

I could only guess at the experiments that Libra had performed on Eris. They sounded extensive. Some of them had apparently included splicing her genes with those of monsters.

“It wasn’t all negative, though,” Eris continued. “Arcane eyes are quite something. Lots you can do with them.”

“But why didn’t you tell me? Why did you wait until now?”

“It’s simple, really. I don’t want to use the arcane eyes... I

shouldn't."

Her explanation confused me. "Huh? But aren't you using the Night Vision skill?"

"I am. But this is very simple."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not unlike your Gluttony skill."

I considered her explanation. It could only mean one thing. "So using them comes with a risk?"

"Correct! The eyes don't belong to me. So, the more powerful the ability, the more strain it puts on me."

"What's the worst-case scenario?"

"I go blind," Eris said with a grin. "And if I continue to use them past that point, I'd probably die."

I couldn't tell how serious she was being. "Please don't overdo it, Eris."

"You're the last person I want to hear *that* from. Right, Roxy?"

"I hate to admit it, but yes. It's like every time I take my eyes off him, he gets up to something dangerous!"

"Yeah, but..." I stammered. Unable to find the right words to defend myself, I changed the subject. "So, Eris...Libra caught you, and then he ran experiments on you."

"To be more precise, he was running those experiments before I was even born."

"Huh? What?"

"You remember what Envy was trying to do back in Galia, right?" As Eris spoke, she looked over at Roxy apologetically.

"You mean, when Envy wanted to kill me?" Roxy asked.

"Yes. I'm still sorry about that," said Eris, tapping the gunblade by her side. "And Envy is too."

I wondered if Envy truly was sorry. I was suspicious. Since the battle at Galia, I'd never once heard Envy's voice. Any message from the sword was relayed through Eris.

Eris had to have seen the look on my face, because she started

laughing. "Envy's full of pride. The sword was aiming for the stars, and you knocked it right back down to earth. It's hard enough for the gunblade to even be here in your presence."

"Hmph. I still haven't forgiven it for what it did back then either."

"Anyway," said Roxy, "I'm still here and alive. The ones who truly paid the price were those caught up and lost in the rampage of the Divine Dragon."

Even though Roxy spoke calmly, her own father, Mason, had been lost to that same beast. He was back because the Door to Distant Lands had opened, but...when I'd asked him about it, his answer had been the same as Roxy's. What happened had happened, and all they could do was make the best of it.

"But what connection is there between your past and what happened with Roxy?" I asked.

"Wow, Fate, I can practically feel the murder dripping from you. You get really serious when it comes to Roxy, huh?"

"Tell me!"

Eris sighed and went on. "So impatient. Envy allowed the tyranny of the holy knights to go unpunished, and so the animosity of the citizens grew. Envy pretended not to see it, and do you know why?"

"Because Envy wanted to create a human in the same way that a crowned beast is made."

"You remember! You're such a good boy!" Eris tousled my hair.

I brushed her hand away. She looked put out for a moment, but her expression grew serious once more when she cast her gaze toward Roxy.

"When Mason died, the citizens only had one holy knight who they could still admire: Roxy. When she was sent to Galia, which was as good as a death sentence, their hate reached its tipping point."

"If I had died then, as I was supposed to, what kind of a human would have been born?" asked Roxy.

Eris took a deep breath. "A human like us," she said slowly.

"No..."

"Yes. A bearer of a skill of Mortal Sin. We are born of human hatred."

I couldn't hide my shock. To be born of hatred...it was unbelievable, and yet on some level, it made perfect sense. Eris looked at me as concern creased her brow.

"I expected a bigger reaction."

"Looking back, the signs were all there," I said. "It's exactly as you said. Envy did this because it wanted a wielder who could replace you."

"Ah, yes. I did say that, didn't I?"

"But I'm glad you told me. Thank you."

Eris's eyes grew wide. "I never expected to be thanked. Especially not after telling you that your birth was the result of something like that..."

"I think the old me would've reacted negatively. But the person I am now, well... I'm not alone anymore."

I placed my hand on the hilt of my black sword, looked at Roxy, and thought back on all the people I'd met along my travels. "Thanks to Roxy, I no longer want to live in the past."

I couldn't change the circumstances of my birth. The same was true of the past more generally. I could wish that I had made different choices all I wanted, but it wouldn't change anything. There was no turning back the clock. Roxy had taught me that after the battle with Rafale. It was more important to live in the present than to dwell on my history. For as long as I lived, I would never forget the warmth in that moment.

"I want Myne to understand that too," I said. "I want to make her realize that, although I doubt I can do half as good a job as you did, Roxy."

"Fay..."

"Well, I hope you can find a way," said Eris. "But you know it's not going to be easy. Myne is powerful—far more than you might think. Can you stop her?"

"Well, if I want her to listen to me, then I'll have to find some way to do it."

We continued along through the darkness until we reached a cavernous space. It was not a natural cave. The construction reminded me of the Military District in the kingdom.

Chapter 10: The Old Gate

WATER TRICKLED DOWN from the ceiling and gathered in a small stream that ran beneath our feet. As we walked on, our footsteps splashed and echoed. I was on edge at first, constantly expecting monsters to pop up in front of us, but I sensed no danger. I heard only the quiet burble of flowing water.

I thought about what Eris had said: that those who bore Skills of Mortal Sin were born from the accumulation of human hatred and therefore embodied those emotions. Moments in my past flashed through my mind, hatred in my thoughts and actions. I was surprised by the clarity of those feelings.

At times, I was struck with a feeling as though an unfathomable darkness marked my heart. This feeling had been at its worst when I returned to the kingdom and fought Rafale. Back when I wore the skull mask to hide my identity, it was like I became another person entirely. In front of the castle throne, I wanted to and almost did kill the holy knight, Lanchester. Then in Babylon, I sent merciless adventurers to their deaths using their own cold-hearted cruelty. At the time, I felt no guilt for any of it. I knew it was wrong, but it was as if something had broken loose within me, something that pushed me onward. It had felt like that feeling was on the brink of exploding. Because of Roxy, however, I'd managed to overcome the darkness. As proof, I stopped wearing the skull mask.

As I wandered through the corridors of my memories, Greed used Telepathy to say, *"Back then, you were totally under the sway of Gluttony's evil influence. Even my magnificent voice couldn't get through to you."*

"I'm sorry, Greed. I know I was awful."

"Anyone who bears a Skill of Mortal Sin finds themselves in that place. The best you can do is learn to overcome it, because if you can't, it's all over. But I knew you would be fine."

"Oh? It feels like you're being more encouraging than usual today."

"Of course. You wield Greed, the august and mighty black sword. I

need you in the right headspace."

Greed's kind words cheered me up, but I had known him long enough to know that his compliments were never freely given.

"I appreciate it, Greed, but you want something, don't you?"

"You know me too well."

"Do you have any idea how long we've been traveling together?"

Greed cackled. *"It has been quite a while, hasn't it? Even longer than you and Roxy, I dare say."* Greed chuckled again, but continued with a serious voice. *"There's one more thing."*

"What is it?"

"Those impulses you felt in the past... They're not just your Gluttony."

"What do you mean?"

"Call it a hunch. It's different from the Gluttony of my previous wielder. In your case—"

Before Greed could continue, he was drowned out by the raised voices of Eris and Roxy. I realized that I had been entirely absorbed in my conversation with Greed and looked to the source of their cries. We stood before a massive gate, larger even than the one into the kingdom.

"This...looks sturdy."

I would've attempted to cut through it with Greed, but he stopped me. At that moment, I recognized the metal it was made from.

"This is adamantite," said Roxy. "It's said this is the strongest metal in the world. It's also used for the outer walls of Babylon."

"Precisely so, Roxy, Even Weapons of Mortal Sin can't break through this. It would be a different story if Fate was a true master of the blade, but alas..." Eris finished with a sly grin.

"Yeah, yeah, so I'm still not that strong yet," I said. "What's *your* excuse, Eris?"

"I play a support role, remember? I was never well-suited to this kind of thing."

"How tragic for your gunblade. It looks like its edge is quite sharp."

"I could say the same of Greed."

I didn't have a retort. "Yeah, I guess you could..."

Aaron had taught me swordsmanship, and Greed had trained me further on the spiritual plane. But according to both of them, I still had a long journey ahead of me.

Roxy could see how heavily this fact weighed on me. "Don't worry, Fay. You're more the type who really gets going in an actual battle."

"Thanks..."

"She's right, you know. When you fought the Divine Dragon, I honestly thought you didn't stand a chance. You seem to truly thrive in the heat of battle," said Eris. "So I guess there's lots to look forward to."

"Why say that last part?! It's not like I do this because I want to fight everybody!"

"But that's what always ends up happening, Fate."

We were heading directly into the unknown, and Eris had to go and say something ominous. Unfortunately, I had the exact same feeling. But first we had to find a way to open that gate. Eris tried to push it open, but it didn't budge.

"Wow, that's not going to work," she said.

"Giving up so soon?"

"Well, I tried, didn't I? It didn't work! Right, Roxy?"

"If you couldn't do anything, what chance do I have?" said Roxy as her shoulders slumped.

I told Roxy not to worry and stared at the gate. "I wonder if Snow passed through this gate when she came here?"

"It's quite likely. She's one of the holy beastfolk, which likely grants her the special privilege to pass through."

"A special privilege, you say..." I put a hand to the gate. "Huh?"

"No way... But how?!"

"Fay?!"

Eris and Roxy couldn't contain their surprise. The black gate gleamed with a blue light as a seal I recognized from somewhere began to take shape. Then the seemingly immovable gate quietly swung open. Even I was left speechless. I wondered if perhaps my father was the

reason that it had opened to my touch.

“Looks like I have the same privilege,” I said.

“Your father was a Zodiac Knight, after all,” Eris murmured.

“According to Libra, yeah. Based on what my father said in the desert, it has to be true.”

“Hm...so that’s the other half of you, then.” Eris looked somewhat downcast for a moment, but she soon hid that feeling behind a grin. She was still haunted by the horrors that Libra had inflicted on her. Those feelings extended to the Zodiac Knights themselves. Judging by her expression, though, she seemed fine. “Thanks to Snow, I feel like I’m overcoming my prejudice. You’ve always been you, Fate.”

“Huh?”

“We’re all good!” Eris leaped at and hugged me.

It felt more significant this time, like this was helping her overcome the trauma that had held her hostage for so long.

“It’s been hard for you, hasn’t it?” I asked.

“Maybe, but this is just fine.” Eris pulled me closer as I tried to peel her off me.

“Hey, quit using your Domain of E strength.”

“This is just a warm-up exercise.”

“What are you warming up for?!”

I was completely trapped within Eris’s grasp. Then I felt a gaze upon my back that seemed to freeze me to my very core. Turning around, I found Roxy staring daggers at the both of us.

“You two get along like a house on fire, don’t you?” she said.

“You can’t seriously look at *this* and think *that*, can you?!”

“Well, Eris looks like she’s having a wonderful time.”

“Eris, say something! Help!”

“Don’t worry about this, Roxy. It’s just trauma therapy. There’s no deeper meaning to it.”



Roxy looked unconvinced by the explanation. This was inevitable—I wished that Eris would reflect on her recent behavior. She had slept naked in my bed and invaded the men’s bath... Did she plan on claiming *that* was trauma therapy too? She would be far from convincing.

“Do you mind if I ask something?” said Roxy.

“What is it?”

“How do you feel?”

“I feel wonderful!” said Eris.

Roxy was, as always, kind and gentle, but there was something about her in this moment. It was like my eyes were playing tricks on me. I saw a beast like the Divine Dragon writhing behind her. Her aura was more oppressive than anything I had ever known, which meant one thing: It was time to make use of the getaway dash I’d learned directly from Aaron. It was my only option in these situations.

“Well, at least we’ve got the gate open,” I said. “Let’s head on through!”

“Oh, Fay! Wait just a moment!”

“I can’t hear you!” I cried as I ran pell-mell for the gate.

“Yes, you can! I know you can! How long do you intend to hold on to him like that, Eris? Release him immediately!”

The three of us proceeded through the gate and beyond.

Chapter 11: Greed's Wish

PAST THE GATE, the ceiling shone with a faint bluish-white light.

"This reminds me of the kingdom's Military District," I said.

Roxy nodded. "Indeed, except the lights here seem to have a more vivid glow."

"Of course they do." Eris put a hand on the wall. "This is genuine Galian technology, nothing like the imitations back in the kingdom. Still, I never imagined a place like this slept beneath Hausen. I've traveled all across the world, and I still had no idea."

"Wow...I've barely even ventured outside of the kingdom's domain," I said.

The farthest I'd ever gone was Galia. Eris, however, knew what lay beyond that, as she'd gone on a journey when she had her falling out with Envy. I hoped that I, too, could know more of the world out there someday.

"By the way, have you ever seen the ocean, Fate?"

"What's that?" I had no idea what she was talking about, but Roxy apparently did.

"Ah, I've read about that in old tomes," she said. "Far to the south of Galian lands, there exists a huge body of water similar to a massive lake."

"Yeah, that's one way of putting it," said Eris. Then, with a wicked grin on her face, she continued. "Once this is all over, I'll take you. We have to feed Fate some of that sea water."

I already knew that I wasn't going to like this. "What are you scheming?" I asked.

"I'm not scheming. I merely want to introduce you to the wonders of a world you don't know."

"Well then, stop it."

Eris laughed. "Do the two of you know what lies beyond the ocean?"

"I don't have the slightest clue," said Roxy. "There was nothing written about it in all the books I've read."

"I don't know either," I said.

"Well, you don't even know what the ocean is, so no surprises there," said Eris.

"Yeah, yeah, no need to rub it in."

"There are new lands out there, unexplored and undiscovered. It's so expansive I don't know if you could ever traverse its entirety."

"New lands... Does that mean there are new monsters out there too?"

Eris rolled her eyes. "You really don't know anything, huh? Then again, Greed being the way he is, I guess a part of me always knew."

"Before my Gluttony awakened, I really didn't know anything at all," I said. "Since then, I've tried my hardest to catch up."

"It's okay, I get it," said Eris. "The lands out there? Past the ocean? They don't have monsters. Only animals."

"What?!"

Roxy and I were equally surprised. Monsters were a part of life. As far back as I could remember, monsters had been a danger that existed all across the lands. None who lived could avoid the presence of monsters in their lives.

"Is it even possible for such a peaceful place to exist?" I asked.

"It is."

"So why don't humans try to cross the seas to get there?"

"Mainly because they don't know about it. But there's another problem. In order to get to those lands, you'd have to cross Galia. You see what I'm saying?"

"Ah...I do."

The lands of Galia essentially blocked travel. Galia was a place where strong monsters lived. Crossing the entirety of Galia would be an impressive feat even for a seasoned adventurer, which meant that it was nearly impossible for an ordinary person. Orc colonies also existed in the south of Galia. Countless beasts roamed those lands. Getting past them wouldn't be easy.

Long ago, I had trained near the orc colonies. The monsters were like a living, breathing tsunami, a torrent of violence not unlike the death parades that often threatened the sentinel city of Babylon. It was far too much for the vast majority of adventurers, and for people without battle skills, even setting foot into the Galian region was practically a death sentence.

“In the past, Galia ruled a vast swath of land that included what we know as the kingdom. However, I often wondered if they ever managed to cross the ocean. That was why I crossed it myself, to make sure.”

“To make sure that the lands were unsullied by the touch of Galia?”

“Exactly. Based on your reaction, you still haven’t understood the gravity of such an idea, have you?”

“Sorry...”

“Now, now, no need to sulk. You’re fine just the way you are, Fate. And besides, first we have to worry about Myne—and shutting the Door to Distant Lands.”

“Eris is right,” added Roxy. “I confess that I don’t understand all of it either. But if Eris is really going to take us there when all this is over, then we’ll understand when we get there.”

“Exactly!” said Eris, pleased with Roxy’s reasoning.

A land free from the influence of Galia... All I knew was that it had no monsters—a peaceful place. Unlike animals, monsters had developed an appetite for human flesh. Greed had told me something like that once before, but as usual, he dropped into his characteristic silence rather than answering my follow-up questions. His silence usually wasn’t a good sign. At the same time, he sometimes went quiet when he was simply grumpy.

I gave the black sword a little poke. He had been quiet for a long time.

“*What is it?*” Greed asked.

“Eris said she’s traveled to the other side of the ocean.”

“*Well, the curious are always going to be curious.*”

“Hm? That’s all you have to say?”

“That’s it. It’s not like I’m going to be crossing the ocean any time soon.”

There was something off about the sword’s tone of voice. “Greed, are you...jealous?”

“Huh?! Of course not! I’m just a sword, nothing else. I’m not afforded the freedoms of others.”

“In that case, how about I take you?”

Greed chuckled ever so slightly, but I couldn’t tell if he was actually happy or if he simply thought the gesture was idiotic. *“Do what you want,”* he said, and dropped into silence.

“What did Greed say?” asked Eris, having overheard my muttering.

“He said the curious are always going to be curious.”

Eris laughed. “I can picture him saying that. Even so...I think Greed wants to see the new lands more than anyone else.”

Greed’s voice suddenly interrupted my thoughts. *“Enough is enough! Don’t you have places to be?! Have you forgotten Libra’s threats?!”*

“All right, all right,” I said. “No need to shout.”

He was so loud that his words seemed to reverberate in my skull. The sword surprised me. I hadn’t expected that he would want to see the lands on the far side of the ocean. He’d said he couldn’t go anywhere himself because he didn’t have the means. So I decided that someday I’d act as his means of transportation. He always helped me out, after all.

“Greed?” I said.

“What?”

“When this battle is over—when we’re done—I’ll take you to the lands across the ocean.”

“Suit yourself...”

“Don’t you worry, I’ll do exactly that.”

Greed never talked much about himself, so I was happy to get to know the sword a little better. Greed and I never spoke about this kind of thing. We found ourselves with more to discuss because we traveled in the company of Eris and Roxy.

This is why traveling in a party is such a good idea, I thought.

We saw a bright light at the end of the long corridor—the exit. Eris and Roxy noticed too, and our footsteps grew louder as we picked up our pace. Then I saw it.

“What...is that?”

A city stretched out before us, as large as Seifort, even though it was entirely underground. Suddenly, I felt like we were standing aboveground. Above us, floating in an artificial sky, hung a spherical ball of light not unlike the sun.

Chapter 12: The Underground City of Grandol

AS I STARED up in wonder, Greed said, *"It's an artificial sun. But if it's been activated, that means..."*

"Somebody is living here?" I interjected.

"Right... Fate, look next to that building over there!"

I assumed it might be Myne and Shin, but when I saw what Greed was talking about, I was at a complete loss for words. Roxy and Eris were no different. Both stood as still as statues, their mouths open in disbelief.

"Are they...people?" asked Roxy.

"But they're partially transparent... Ghosts?"

We approached the human-like shapes and called out to them, but we received no response. They all resembled Myne, with tanned complexions and white hair...the unique traits of the now-extinct Galian people.

"It's like they don't even know we're here."

"They're not aware of our presence."

"They don't look like they even have minds," said Eris

The Myne-like figures endlessly repeated basic gestures with no apparent aim.

"They're clinging to tattered memories, and those slivers of life power their movements," Greed said quietly, then sighed. *"They're partial resurrections."*

"What does that mean?"

"They were all long dead, yet they were summoned back to our world against their will. That's why they look like ghosts."

"They'll remain like this?"

"Who knows? If the Door to Distant Lands continues to open, perhaps their resurrections will complete. Or perhaps not."

"I don't get it."

Greed paused for a moment. *"In the end, it's up to them."*

"You mean they each decide whether to come back or not?"

"Indeed. These ghosts are in a state of confusion. Do they want to remain dead, or do they want to return?"

"What would they be confused about?"

"At the very least, they all have their own regrets. You saw your parents' graves yourself. One of those graves was unsullied, untouched. The other, however..."

"The other came back."

My father had regrets, and they were reason enough for him to choose to live. My mother, on the other hand, had no such thing. I'd never seen my mother's face. The only shape of her that I knew was the shape of her gravestone. My father said she was a person who often smiled and laughed. Even now I wanted to meet her, if only for an instant.

"What's wrong?" asked Greed.

"It's nothing..." I muttered.

"You're an open book to me."

"Huh?"

"Part of you wishes your mom had come back for you, huh? But she didn't have any regrets like that, so you're sulky about it. Grow up, boy."

"Wha...?!"

Greed had hit the bull's-eye, and I didn't know what to say.

Roxy and Eris didn't know what we were talking about. To them, it looked like I was simply muttering to myself.

"Is something wrong?" asked Roxy with worry in her eyes.

I shook my head, "Just Greed being Greed."

"I see..."

I hid my embarrassment from Roxy by not going into the details. Meanwhile, Greed continued to speak, but I didn't pay any attention to him. Eris smiled at me when I glanced at her, like she saw right through me. There was no hiding from her insights.

"Still a child at heart, aren't you, Fate?"

“That’s rich coming from you.”

“Well, from my point of view, both you and Roxy are significantly younger than me.”

“Have you considered maybe acting your age then? That’d be really helpful.”

“Hmph. I’ve got it covered.” Eris raised her gunblade up high, as though she were ready to lead us into victory.

“That doesn’t inspire much confidence...” I sighed.

“Unfortunately not...” added Roxy.

“You two are awful! You don’t have any idea how much I’ve prepared for what’s ahead.”

Since the battle with the Zodiac Scorpion, Eris had often gone off somewhere by herself. Was it possible that she really did spend that time training? It was hard to imagine, given that she usually gallivanted around with a carefree attitude.

“But I’m still not back to full power,” added Eris.

“Well, don’t overdo it,” I said.

“Oh? Are you worried about me?”

I pointed at Eris’s eyes. “Your arcane eyes. Don’t overuse them.”

“You really are kind, aren’t you? Hard to believe half of you came from *their* bloodline.”

My father was one of the Zodiac Knights, which meant that he was in all likelihood one of the holy beastfolk, like Libra and Snow. That made me half human and half holy beast. But I still didn’t know what that entailed....

“*Fate, look,*” said Greed.

As I looked up at the artificial sun, a red-haired girl flew through the air. She wore the same clothes as Snow. Whereas once those clothes had been much too big for her, now they were a perfect fit.

“Is that... Is that Snowy?” asked Roxy.

“I don’t think it could be anyone else.”

Perhaps Libra’s influence had changed her.

“Snow!” I called out.

She headed north and then dropped to the ground.

“Let’s go,” I said.

We ran off at once, passing spectral figures as we chased after Snow. The ghosts seemed to hover between dimensions. We passed right through them, but as we did, my Telepathy skill picked up fragments of memories. I saw happy families eating together, confessions of love to long-adored crushes, and successful research. I saw both the fortunate and the unfortunate. The Galians were not unlike us, I realized; they had lived each day as it came.

“Hey, Greed?” I said.

“What?”

“Why did the Galians go extinct?”

“*Why that question all of a sudden?*”

“To begin with, they were so technologically advanced. Secondly, I sense from the memories of these spirits that the people seemed happy. I can’t connect those two facts with the fact that they all perished.”

Greed laughed. *“In every generation, the people at the bottom of the ladder always get caught up in the schemes and machinations of those on top. You had firsthand experience of this before your Gluttony awakened. You were on a different rung back then.”*

He was right. From the moment my Gluttony awakened, my life was forever changed.

“It wasn’t the average citizen that destroyed Galia,” he said. *“It was those with much more power.”*

“Does it have something to do with Skills of Mortal Sin?”

“That’s one reason. I’ll tell you about it when we’re finished here.”

“Really?!”

“Yeah, really. It’s about time you knew anyway. So don’t die out there.”

“I made a promise to Aaron. I intend to keep it.”

Yes! At last, the always-cryptic Greed is going to open up! I thought. But I couldn’t let myself get too excited, since I still had to fight a literal life-or-death battle. Even so, as I ran, I couldn’t hide my surprise at

Greed's rare display of kindness.

"Fay! Snowy stopped!" Eris said.

We drew to a halt and looked up at Snow, still floating in the air. She looked down at us, her eyes devoid of her will.

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Eris.

An instant later, Snow plummeted from the sky and hurtled toward us with incredible speed.

"No choice but to fight, huh?" I muttered.

"Fay..."

Roxy frowned as she said that, but the truth was that if we did nothing, we'd be killed. I took Greed from his sheath and stood ready to face Snow.

"Roxy, Eris, get away from here," I said.

"What are you going to do?" asked Eris.

"Libra forced those memories into her. Snow has lost her senses, that's all."

"Do you have proof of that?"

I had no concrete evidence—none solid enough for Eris. But as I parried Snow's attacks with the black sword, I was absolutely certain. Her attacks were clumsy and awkward, exactly like those of the Zodiac Scorpion that had rampaged through the Desert of Extinction.

"You remember it too, don't you?" I said to Eris. "This fighting style."

"She's gone berserk."

"It's the same as before. If I'm right, she'll calm down if we can knock her unconscious. Just like last time."

Still, I hadn't expected to have a rematch with Snow in this place. Not here. A bloodred ichor welled up around our feet.

"Fay!" Roxy cried.

Then she unleashed the Grand Cross tech-art. The holy light purified the floor, revealing the source of the oozing ichor: Shin. He was the superorganism that had tempted Myne before disappearing with her at his side.

“You all look like you’re having a wonderful time. Can I join in, Gluttony?”

Countless tentacles sprouted from the red liquid and congealed into the forms of various monsters: goblins, kobolds, sandmen, orcs, gargoyles, and so on. There were even crowned beasts among them.

“Soon the Door will be fully open. I’ll need you all to wait patiently until then.”

I shook Snow off of me and shouted, “Where is she?! Where’s Myne?!”

“Gluttony is the last thing I want her seeing right now.”

Shin rushed in with an attack. Simultaneously, the rampaging Snow approached from behind. All opportunities for escape were cut off as we were surrounded by translucent red monsters.

Chapter 13: Snow's Rampage

I GLANCED AT ROXY, worried whether she was prepared for battle. My worries were entirely misplaced. Her eyes didn't waver, not even a hint of fear in her gaze. I used Identify on the translucent red monsters that surrounded us.

"Roxy, we need you to take care of the monsters!"

"Understood!"

It was just like the Zodiac Scorpion battle, but we had no other choice. Shin and Snow were both in the Domain of E—too powerful for Roxy. Eris and I stood back-to-back.

Looking over my shoulder, I asked, "Can you manage Shin?"

"But of course! I guess that leaves you to deal with Snow, then?"

"I need to bring her back to her senses."

"I'm counting on it." Eris gave me a smile and a wink. "I'll buy you some time."

I chuckled. "You know, I won't object if you finish him off yourself."

"What? But I'm so fragile..."

Eris's voice dripped with sweetness as she cut down one of Shin's attacks. The crimson liquid stretched out like tentacles floating in the air. Eris truly wasn't kidding about her training, and it showed.

"Don't push past your limits," I said.

"Are you forbidding the use of my arcane eyes?"

"Considering the risks involved, I don't want you to."

Eris laughed. "You're the last person I want lecturing me about being prudent."

"Touché."

We leaped into action. I went toward Snow and Eris toward Shin, with Roxy backing us up. Everyone's roles were set.

“Snow!” I shouted as my sword locked with the blade that was Snow’s hand.

Her body was covered with some kind of pale-blue barrier that could even deflect my black sword. It reminded me of the Zodiac Scorpion. Still, Snow didn’t seem to respond to her name.

“Fate! You have to do what you did back in the desert! There’s no other way!” said Greed.

“So, it’s just as I suspected...”

“You have to knock her out. When you did that last time, her rampage shuddered to a halt.”

“But this time, Libra was involved. Even if we succeed, who knows what’ll happen when she wakes up?”

“Either way, we have to bring her under control.”

Back then, my father helped me against Snow when she was in the form of the Zodiac Scorpion. Now I faced her alone.

“That barrier’s going to be an issue. Use the black scythe.”

I shoved Snow back. I had the tempo, so as she closed in for another attack, I transformed Greed into the black scythe.

Now! I thought, trying to rend through Snow’s barrier.

“Huh?!”

Snow suddenly came to a complete halt and backed off. I’d thought she was in a mindless berserker state. What was the meaning of this?

“Her instincts sensed the danger.”

“Hmph...how troublesome.”

If Snow could rely on her instincts instead of conscious thought, my attacks would always be a touch slow in comparison, and if she could accurately read my movements, I was out of luck.

“This is not an opponent you can take lightly,” said Greed. *“Do you still intend to hold back against her?”*

“However difficult the battle, I don’t want to hurt her.”

I could almost feel Greed rolling his nonexistent eyes, but instead he gave a hearty laugh. *“I knew you’d say something like that. Well then, show me! Show the mighty Greed how it’s done!”*

“Just watch.”

Gripping the black scythe tightly, I closed my eyes. If I tried to use my eyes to track Snow, I'd always be a step behind, but if I instead followed the currents of her magical energy, I could predict where she was going. Ever since Aaron taught me this skill, I had practiced it whenever I could. Just as Eris had trained in secret, I had also sharpened my skills. Battle wasn't the time for warm-ups or practice, but I would make it work. I would prove my worth. I owed that to Roxy, who had helped me practice.

I remembered what my father had told me in the Desert of Extinction. Greed felt it in my heart.

“It still bothers you, doesn't it? What he said.”

“I told him I wouldn't stand idly by. I have to do this.”

“Just when I thought you were showing some maturity, you reveal that you're still a little kid who misses his dad...”

No matter what my father did, he was still my father. Even if he stole the Philosopher's Stone, and even if he kidnapped Laine... Even if he was one of Libra's comrades... Even if there was something from his past that made him try to kill Snow...

I leaped from building to building, chasing Snow as she soared through the air.

“Snow!”

She moved with incredible speed, but I could predict her movements by the flow of her energy. This time, I would counter her when she tried to attack. I recalled what Aaron had taught me: *Keep the soul fiery, but the mind cool*. I swung the black scythe, anticipating Snow's imminent arrival. When I opened my eyes, I saw Snow without her pale-blue barrier.

“Yes!”

“You did it!”

Now the real battle began. I had only made it *possible* to attack her. I transformed Greed back into the black sword and returned him to his sheath.

“Going to take her without me, huh?”

“Yeah. My fists can do all the talking.”

“Sounds like something Aaron would say.”

“You said it.”

Now that her barrier was gone, I could try to grab Snow’s hands. I dodged her kicks and chops, trying to get close enough, when a heavy kick slammed into the side of my head, rattling me. As the blow jolted my body, my vision blurred and I nearly lost consciousness.

“Fate!” Greed cried. *“You sure you don’t need me?”*

Greed’s voice brought me back to my senses, and I once again closed the distance on Snow.

“I’ll. Be. Fine!”

I took hold of both of Snow’s hands, and she struggled against my grip. Now I had to make it back to the ground. As I was thinking about how to do so, I found myself surrounded by winged, crimson monsters.

“Just when things were going my way!”

The monsters closed in, but they weren’t aiming for me—they were aiming for Snow. The monsters were clearly weaker than either of us, but when I saw the wicked fangs in their mouths, it brought back memories of the monsters called nightwalkers. With a mere bite, they could deny a human the mercy of death and transform them into one of their own. Even those in the Domain of E couldn’t resist those bites. According to Greed, Shin’s powers made this possible. Now those fangs were headed straight for Snow and me.

“Grr!”

Should I release Snow’s hands and try to draw the black sword? But the monsters didn’t give me time to think as they closed in. This was no time for second-guessing. Could I unsheathe the sword in time?

“Fay!”

All my worries vanished when that brave voice cut through the air. In the next moment, the holy sword tech-art Grand Cross seemed to cleave the very air that separated me from the monsters.

“Roxy! But how...?”

I couldn’t hide my surprise. Roxy’s attack easily destroyed the red monsters. They were not in the Domain of E, but each one of them was at least on par with a crowned beast. Roxy had obliterated them in mere seconds.

“I don’t understand it either,” Roxy said. “Perhaps I’m especially effective against their sort?”

“If that’s the case, Eris could use your help.”

“I’m on my way.”

Even Roxy didn’t know why, but it seemed that she had an advantage of some kind against Shin. Perhaps this would allow us to bridge the huge stat divide that separated us from him. My heart soared to see Roxy proving her worth, but right now I had to grapple with Snow, still trapped in my arms.

“I’m not letting go this time!”

Snow growled in response. “Rrrr...”

Without loosening my grip, I pulled Snow toward the ground.

“Take it easy! Snow! It’s me!”

The words weren’t reaching her, but I kept shouting her name, hoping that at some point she would understand me. Struggling wildly, Snow bit my neck.

“Ow! Huh?”

In that instant, my Telepathy engaged with Snow for the very first time. Though we’d been in contact many times before, the skill had never worked. Just as with Myne, I had always thought that some unknown power blocked the skill. I was stunned to find that it worked here, of all places.

Fragments of Snow’s memories began to flow into me. I saw her as an adult, much older than her current form. Her body was bruised and beaten; she looked to be racked with pain. She was clearly dealing with a heavy wound, and a great deal of blood flowed from her as she walked.

Snow was stumbling through a great forest, alone. At the limit of her endurance, she collapsed near a cliff. The memories flew by for a time, so when she next opened her eyes, a boy stood before her.

No way, that’s impossible...



But if it was, then I was seeing the impossible with my own eyes. If this memory was real, then I had met Snow when I was just a boy! But that was impossible! I had no recollection of any such memory. I felt sure that I would've remembered seeing someone with such heavy injuries. No matter how much I tried, I could not recall any such encounter. I wondered if this was one of the memories Libra said he had given her.

Even if these memories were fake, I couldn't fathom what possible worth Libra saw in them. *So does that mean...these really were Snow's memories?* As I tried to work through it all, the memory continued to play out.

"Are you okay?"

Snow did not answer the boy's question. This was only natural; her injuries were so severe that she couldn't speak. The boy soon realized this and grew flustered. I knew this personality. It really *was* me.

Snow mustered the last of her strength to try to run away, but the boy stopped her.

"You shouldn't move when you're hurt like this. You're in luck. I've been gathering medicinal herbs for my dad; they might help."

Snow maintained her stony silence. She glared at the boy, but he seemed not to mind. His lack of skill was evident in how clumsily he dressed her wounds.

"I'm sorry," the boy said. "I'm still not very good at this. But Dad is always getting hurt, so I really want to get better at it."

The boy looked at the wounds under Snow's clothes and put a hand to his mouth in shock. In the next moment, his eyes became resolute, and he got to work. First, he cleaned and debrided the wounds with water from his canteen, then applied a poultice of medicinal leaves. Finally, he tore off strips of his tunic to use as bandages.

"There," he said, "that looks pretty good. But this is the best I can do, lady. I'm sorry I can't do anything more."

When those words were spoken, the memory ended. In the present, Snow had exhausted herself completely. I tapped her cheek a few times, but she didn't stir.

"Looks like she fainted," said Greed. "*She's a bundle of trouble, isn't*

she? Hm? What's wrong, Fate?"

"It's nothing..." I said. I still didn't know if the memories I had seen were real. It was pointless to worry about them now, so I put them out of my mind. "But more importantly, this wasn't Snow's fault. It was —"

"Libra. He's always been like this, going way back. Doesn't like to get his own hands dirty."

"Once this is all over, I hope you'll be candid about that too," I said.

"All right. But focus on the next fight first. She talks a big game, but Eris has a real trial on her hands."

I looked over at the battle between Eris and Shin. It was clear Eris was on the back foot. She was facing off against a huge wave of Shin clones.

"Roxy, can you look after Snow for me?"

"Understood."

It seemed like Roxy was prepared for just this eventuality. As soon as she heard my voice, she wiped out the monsters around her with a tech-art and hurried over.

"You did it," she said.

"Somehow. But I sensed that she wasn't fighting with any intent to kill me."

"Of course not. Snowy would never do such a thing."

There was something genuinely convincing in Roxy's tone. It made me feel how obvious it was that Snow wouldn't want to hurt us. For me, Roxy's words always rang the truest.

"It's going to get serious from here on out," I said. "You need to get clear of the immediate area."

"Okay..."

She was disappointed, but a fight between those in the Domain of E was too dangerous for Roxy. There was a time when I'd considered forming a bond that would grant her access to those powers, but...I couldn't bring myself to do it. I just couldn't. She carried Snow in her arms as she walked away.

"You are truly spineless," said Greed.

"No, I'm not. I just can't help thinking about Aaron."

"You mean about entangling her in the web of Skills of Mortal Sin?"

Aaron was kind and generous—he always helped me. I was forever in his debt. But the course of his life had been permanently altered by the Skills of Mortal Sin. If we'd never formed the bond that we had, he could have led a much more peaceful life. When I imagined that world...I knew that I didn't want to bring Roxy any deeper into this than she already had been.

"Let the mighty Greed tell you something."

"What?"

"That girl is never going to give up. You know that better than anyone."

I did. That was why I was terrified.

"Anyway, let's get on with it, Fate!" shouted Greed.

With Greed's call to action, I leaped into the battle between Eris and Shin. First, I sliced my way through the Shin clones that surrounded her. Even cutting them cleanly in half, I felt little resistance. I didn't hear the metallic voice in my head either, meaning none of these Shins were the real one.

"Could you be any slower?" asked Eris. "A bit later and I would have been in a real spot of bother."

"Sorry, it took more effort than expected. Besides, what happened to all your bluster from earlier?"

"I think that should be fairly self-evident."

We were surrounded by countless clones of Shin, in addition to the horde of red monsters. It was like two against an army of thousands. We stood back-to-back and cut down the Shins as they attacked.

"You could have handled this with all that training you did..."

"Don't push me, boy. I'll use this magic eye if I have to."

"I said I was sorry! But all jokes aside, we're getting nowhere cutting down these clones," I said as Eris put a bullet right between the eyes of one.

“Exactly right!” she said with a nod. “They’re all connected to the real Shin, hidden somewhere beneath the ground. They’re little more than puppets. Cut them down and they’ll spring back up.”

I was stunned by how relaxed she was in the heat of battle. It seemed like the longer you lived, the more your feelings and senses became dull. It made me think of what Myne had said about losing her sense of taste.

“Beneath the ground... Is there some way to trace his magical energy to pinpoint his location?”

“Nope. It’s because of how he’s formed. He’s a bizarre sort of organism, you know?”

From the beginning, Shin had slumbered underground, his body shattered into pieces. Those parts were special stones referred to as Philosopher’s Stones. So he was less like a living organism and more like a mineral or ore. It was possible that he had found a safe haven deep underground from where he could send his clones and monsters, marionettes to do his dirty work.

“After all the bragging you did, that’s all you can say?”

Eris laughed. “Shin’s scared.”

“What do you mean? Of what?”

“Of you. The bearer of Gluttony. He tried to fight the last Gluttony bearer too. He tried and failed, again and again. I wonder if that’s why this is the only way he knows how to fight.” Eris had an amused, proud look on her face. “So what about you, Fate? What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to do exactly what the last guy did. What else is there?”

“Always reliable, aren’t you? In that case, I’m going to have to improve my game too.”

“Hey—”

I started to say something, but Eris’s eyes already gleamed with a dull luster. She had activated her arcane eyes.

“Relax,” she said, “this is on the low end of the spectrum. However...”

“I got it. Let’s go pull Shin out of hiding fast.”

“I’m counting on you to cover me, Fate.”

She wouldn't be able to fight and concentrate on her arcane eyes at the same time. As she ran north, I cleared a bloodred path for her through the monsters that stood in our way.

Chapter 14: Battle Underground

I LED THE WAY, cutting through the Shins in my way until they were a fine red mist while Eris followed close behind.

“Are we heading in the right direction?”

“Yes! Keep going north!”

“How’re your eyes?”

“Look at you, all worried about a girl like me. Guess the hard work was worth it.”

“Eris...”

She pretended to be cavalier, but her eyes were growing more and more bloodshot. She’d assured me that she wasn’t straining herself, but she could’ve lied. Did she know how I felt? I didn’t know, but either way, she grinned.

“These eyes? They’re called Unseen Sight. The scope is limited, but with them, I can trace souls. They’re our ticket to locating Shin.”

“So even if he masks his magical energy, he can’t hide everything.”

“You got it!”

The ability to trace souls... Even though I devoured them on a regular basis, I had only ever seen souls once: when Aaron and I had released the souls trapped in Hausen by the crowned beast known as the Genesis of Death. Aaron’s family and friends were finally released from the monster’s control and allowed to pass on to the afterlife. Something about the souls in that moment had been both beautiful and lonely.

There was one more thing I wanted to know about Eris’s Unseen Sight. “Can you sense Myne with those eyes too?”

“I knew you would ask that,” said Eris as she deftly dodged out of the way of an attacking Shin.

“What’s wrong with that?” I said. “We’ve been chasing her this whole time.”

Eris laughed. “Don’t give me that look. These eyes struggle at that range, and using them for an extended period isn’t easy. Look.”

Rivulets of blood fell from Eris’s eyes.

“Eris?!”

She’d told me they were on the low end of the spectrum, but the strain was obvious. Nonetheless, Eris continued to smile. “But at least now I can tell you for certain: Myne is here.” She pointed in the direction we were headed. “She’s with Shin. So, what do you want to do?”

“What I came here to.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that. Better hurry.”

We picked up our pace and continued north. As we did, Shin’s clones became less frequent, but the city itself grew livelier in its way, as though the ghosts of the Galian people were growing in number.

“Looks like this place really feels the effects of the Door,” said Greed.

“In other words...”

“We’re close.”

At long last, we arrived. The real battle would determine whether I could stop Myne. I still didn’t know how strong she was in a serious fight.

“So I have to fight Shin *and* Myne,” I said.

“It would be nice to have another person on the front line with you,” said Eris, “but I’m better as support.”

“No use wishing for what doesn’t exist.”

We would no longer be in a position where we could deal with the enemies separately. We wouldn’t be fighting red monsters, and we wouldn’t be fighting mere clones of Shin either. We had to face off against the real deal, and it would be an entirely different level of battle.

“Then it’s just you and me. Are you ready?” I asked.

“I’ll be okay, but...the real pressure is on you, Fate. You have to hold both of them off on your own.”

In truth, we didn’t have an alternative. We knew that going in. But that was why I’d come prepared.

"This takes me back to the time we defeated the darkness in the Desert of Extinction," said Eris. "You've mastered the technique since then, I assume? As a bearer of a skill of Mortal Sin, it's expected of you."

"I can handle it."

"Good, that's a relief. To fight Myne, you'll need to be at least that good. How long can you last?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"Hm..." Eris looked unimpressed.

What?! Fifteen minutes isn't long enough?! If fifteen minutes wouldn't cut it, I was curious to know how long Eris could last.

"Still, it's remarkable that you can maintain it as long as you can, given how little time you've had to train. You owe a debt of gratitude to Greed and Luna and her spiritual plane."

"They never miss a chance to remind me," I said. "You know how they are."

Eris laughed. "Indeed I do."

"But there are still times when I feel divided...like I'm dissociating."

"I know the feeling! It was like that for me at first too. You just have to get used to it!"

But I wasn't sure if this power was something I could ever get used to, and a part of me felt that it was something I *shouldn't*.

"It's a matter of soul!" Greed interjected. *"You gotta put your soul into it!"*

"That's what you think is crucial?! Soul? Really?!"

"If the mighty Greed deems it so, it must be true."

He would tell me that on the spiritual plane, too, ad nauseum. *Put your soul into it! More spirit!* My ears ached from hearing that, but perhaps he was right. Even Eris said I needed to get used to it.

"Don't forget we can't use it repeatedly," warned Greed. *"Even using it once will weaken your mental fortitude."*

"Got it. But you know...it always feels like I'm...being taken over."

“Mind your phrasing, boy!”

I felt that Greed had a tendency toward wanting to take over.

Eris laughed as she watched me stand there muttering to the black sword.

“What?” I asked.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you two are so cute together.”

Greed and I responded in unison, “What part of us is cute?!”

“The part you’re showing me right now. Envy and I, we’re nowhere near as close as we used to be.”

“I thought you guys made up after the battle at Galia.”

“In a manner of speaking. But we couldn’t go back to the way things were. It’s like if a married couple lived apart for centuries, then moved in together merely because they shared the same goal.”

“It’s a...bit hard for me to wrap my head around that particular metaphor...”

Eris giggled. “I thought as much. In short, Envy and I know each other extremely well, but we’ve been apart for a very long time. That’s what we wanted. But because of the Door to Distant Lands, we’ve been thrown together again. No time to mentally prepare, no time to get used to things—we’re simply forced to fight together like we used to. It’s not easy.”

I tried picturing what that would be like. I imagined being thrown into battle after an argument with Greed, but before we’d had a chance to hash things out. I could see how it would be awkward. For Eris, the interim was hundreds of years. Even speculating about it filled the air with a certain tense awkwardness.

“What sort of person is Envy, anyway? When we fought in Galia, the gunblade was hellbent on getting me to join it.”

“Envy likes to keep its favorite things close by. It might have even wanted you to replace me.”

“Ugh, I’ll pass.”

“Don’t be like that. Not when I’m thinking about entrusting the gunblade to you if the worst should happen.”

“Damn, Eris, that’s a horribly ominous thing to say at a time like

this.”

Jokes aside, Eris had one more thing to say about her gunblade. “Envy is a good person. Has been for a long time.”

“If you say so...”

A good person... That gunblade had controlled the Divine Dragon and annihilated countless human lives, including Roxy’s father, Mason. It had tried to kill Roxy too. I couldn’t bring myself to forgive the weapon for that.

“For better or worse, Envy has a pure heart. I mean, Greed’s better than he seems, right?”

“That’s still to be seen,” I replied.

“*What?!*” the sword said. “*No matter how you look at me, I’m full of virtue and heroism!*”

Greed argued with fiery intensity, but if he really wanted people to think he was a good guy, he needed to improve his everyday behavior.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said.

“*Don’t brush me off!*”

I was used to handling the sword; this behavior was what I expected.

“Even now, you two are just like always,” Eris said, sulking. “I’m more than a little envious.”

“Just like always... I hope we can bring our usual energy to the battle.”

“We’re almost there.”

Massive edifices stood before us. They were so much larger than anything in Seifort’s Military District that there was no point in comparison. In the large plaza before the structures, there were no ghosts. Though ghosts seemed to be practically everywhere else, none would trespass in that space. It was almost as if something terrifying kept them at bay.

In the middle of the plaza stood a girl with white hair, impassive, and holding a giant black axe. She exuded an unstoppable, overwhelming aura.

“Myne...”

I gripped the black sword tight in my fist.

Chapter 15: Combining Power

A GROWING NUMBER of ghosts crowded around the plaza in which we stood. It was as if they were an audience for the upcoming battle. Though none of the ghosts could be called sentient, perhaps their instincts drove them to throng around this ersatz arena.

The overwhelming pressure of Myne's aura made me want to flinch and retreat. Though I knew I had to press forward, my body was telling me the opposite: *Go back. Retreat.*

I'd never felt anything like it.

I had fought strong foes in the past. I'd faced the Divine Dragon and the Undead Archdemon. I could now state with confidence that none of them compared to Myne. When we traveled together, I had known that she was extremely powerful, but I'd had no understanding of the extent of her strength until this moment.

"Impressive," said Greed. *"She's become even stronger, and she even managed to hide it from me."*

Her aura had changed, as though she became something entirely different. This wasn't just something I intuited; I could see vivid flashes of lightning cloaking her as a raiment.

"She's not holding back," Greed continued. *"Your next step starts the battle, whether you like it or not."*

Talking things over was clearly out of the question. We never would have reached this point if that was a possibility. I didn't know if she would register the words I spoke, but there was still something I needed to tell her.

"I guess in the end, this is the only way we can settle our differences."

Aaron had once told me that when humans couldn't come to a mutual understanding, confrontation was inevitable. This was all the truer when you weren't the reason for it.

Before this world slipped any further away from us, I had to close the Door to Distant Lands. But Myne would under no circumstances give

up on the Door, not if what Luna had told me was true. She had sought the Door for millennia—it wasn't a goal she could abandon. Now that we were here and things had come to this, our conflicting views would inexorably lead to battle. There was no other way. It was an awful situation, one where right and wrong, good and evil, would be decided by the victor.

“Myne really believes that she's doing the right thing. We don't have any other choice.”

If I wanted her to listen to me, I had to defeat her first. I glanced back at Eris, and the thunderous crack of a gunshot resounded. Eris buffed me with the Phalanx Bullet. I was swathed in a blue-white film, a barrier that nullified attacks.

“You can't afford to slip up against someone as strong as her,” she said.

“Thank you, Eris.”

Myne leaped into the air. Even the simple act of jumping sent waves of force pressing against me. Her red eyes were so overwhelming that all of my senses, my instincts, told me to retreat.

“Here she comes,” said Greed. “Expect heavy blows, so hold on tight.”



My black sword met the black axe with a dull metallic *clang*. Greed was right. It was heavy—so heavy and forceful that the ground cratered under my feet.

I let out a wry chuckle. This was only Myne's *first* strike.

"*Push back!*" cried Greed. "*The more she uses the black axe in battle, the more effective it becomes!*"

"I know!"

Sloth grew heavier the more it was used. It was difficult to wield because it demanded great strength and agility from its user, but for those who could handle it, Sloth was utterly fearsome.

The black axe pushed down on me, growing heavier every moment. With only the floor underneath me, I had nowhere to go. So instead of moving, I opted to deflect the trajectory of Myne's attack. Sparks flew as the axe slid off the black sword, crashing into the ground next to me. It gouged open the earth as dust and debris billowed out. Using the plume of debris as a smokescreen, I leaped to the right to create some distance, but—

"*Fate!*" shouted Greed.

Myne charged at me through the dust with such speed that I couldn't evade. I had no choice but to meet her attack head-on once more. This time, her attack was twice as forceful.

The clash of metal against metal reverberated throughout the air and through my arms as they strained to withstand the impact. I'd never felt anything like this in past battles. I poured my own power into the black sword, fighting not to lose against the unyielding force of the axe.

This is only her second strike! I knew then that Myne would attack harder and faster as the battle continued. I stared at the girl who wielded the black axe, steadfast in her silence.

"Myne," I said.

She was never talkative. But still, I knew.

"Quit holding back," I said.

Myne remained silent.

"I came here to stop you."

Her eyebrow twitched for just an instant, but I caught it.

“I know why you’re here. Luna told me.”

There was a change in Myne’s once-expressionless face. Always stoic in the heat of battle, her face was now tinged with hesitation. Hardly audible, she spoke a solitary word. “Luna...”

“Yes, Luna,” I said.

For just an instant, I thought I’d found a way to get through to Myne, but there were still those who wouldn’t let us speak so easily. Bloodred tentacles reached out and separated Myne from me. I sensed that letting them hit me would be a bad idea, so I had no choice but to retreat.

“Hmph, I thought I had you there. Too bad.”

Shin emerged from the ground like water bubbling from the cracks. He wasn’t human, but rather an organism in the guise of one. Greed and the others called him a superorganism, capable of hiding anywhere and taking any form. He turned his back to me and strode toward Myne to speak to her.

“As you asked, I’ve given you time,” he said. “However, I will wait no longer.”

Myne was silent.

“So do it. Kill them.”

Silence.

“If you don’t, the Door will not open. If you let this opportunity slip from your grasp, your wish will remain forever unfulfilled.”

Still, silence.

“This is what you’ve yearned for, for thousands of years. Now it is mere moments away, Myne.”

Myne cast her eyes down at her feet as Shin whispered to her.

“They’re all waiting for you. Do you intend to betray them again?”

“No.”

“Then fight like they mean something to you. Fate and his allies are trying to stop you. They are your enemies. Unleash what you are, and show them your power.”

Myne had searched for the Door to Distant Lands for longer than I

could fathom. Assuming Luna's story was true, if I were Myne, my heart would have broken again and again throughout the years.

Shin's whispers touched on the reasons Myne had continued to live until this very moment. They triggered something inside of her, and she was unable to maintain her usual composure. When we had traveled together, Myne had seemed to keep her heart hidden in a faraway place. Now her most heartfelt wishes were on the verge of coming true. Not long ago, I would have made the exact same choices.

Shin turned to me and smiled. It was the supercilious smile of someone assured of their impending triumph.

"Fate! This is bad!" shouted Greed.

"Get away from there, Fate!" Eris shouted at the same time.

Eris, already at a distance, fired a fearsome burst of bullets at Shin and Myne while some supernatural force pushed us backward.

It was Myne's Wrath. She had told me about it during our travels. Though I knew of it, I had never seen the extent of its true power. Until now, I had only ever seen Myne swinging her black axe in a fight. On occasion, she responded to bullies with excessive force, but that felt less like a show of wrath and more like retribution.

So, I had always wondered: *What happens when the bearer of Wrath gives in to their rage?*

The answer to that question played out before my eyes.

"So this is Myne's true form," said Greed.

"I don't think it's something I ever want to see again."

Greed chuckled.

Eris hesitated over her next move. She had recommended our vanguard and rearguard strategy, and it had become obvious that she was no match for Myne.

I looked at Myne as though seeing who she truly was for the first time. A red aura enveloped her, so oppressive that it made me wince. It was the physical manifestation of the excess magical energy flowing from her. Two horns had sprouted from her forehead, and sinister markings engraved themselves upon her body.

"Fate, listen carefully," said Greed. *"She's given herself up to her rage—she's a demon of battle now. Your words can no longer reach her. Her*

present state is similar to when you're consumed by your Gluttony. You know what this means."

"She's unleashed the powers of Wrath itself."

"Indeed. This is not like your half-starved state. Myne has released it in its totality."

Full power right from the get-go...

The time Shin had given her had all but run out, just as he said.

"You can see it in her movements," said Greed. "She's not playing around. Her attacks will be on a whole new level."

I unleashed half of my Gluttony skill in response and entered my half-starved state. In the next instant, Myne vanished from my sight, even though Sloth should have been twice as heavy as usual.

"The time is now, Fate. We won't be able to take her blows otherwise."

"Then let's do it!"

It was time to use something I had only ever practiced during my training on the spiritual plane.

"Greed!"

"Fate!"

As our voices came together, the black sword pulsed with a glowing darkness that wrapped itself around me.

"Crossing!" Greed and I shouted, our voices merged.

Chapter 16: Crossing

THE DEMON OF BATTLE brought down her axe with crushing force. At the same time, Shin's crimson tentacles coursed toward me. Dodging them, I riposted.

"Out of my way!" Greed and I shouted with one voice.

The tentacles stained my blade red as it cut through them and sought the source of red slime: Shin.

"*I'm* not the one you should be worried about..." said Shin as he melted into the earth.

"Eris, locate Shin."

"He's here," she said, aiming her gunblade.

Eris fired into the shadows of a building to the east. Her aim was true, evinced by the roiling red liquid that seeped from its foundation.

"Nice, that should do it," she said. "Be careful, Fate. Myne isn't herself. I'll keep supporting you with Phalanx and Phantom Bullets when the timing is right."

"Thanks," we said.

"I'm moving to higher ground so I can see the field more clearly and prevent Shin from getting in your way. So, it would help me if you —"

"If we didn't get in your way, right?"

"You got it!" Eris laughed. "I can hear the effects of the Crossing in your overlapping voices!"

It was just like Eris to tease us in the midst of a life-or-death battle. I suspected that Eris was also using the Crossing. Her movements had become sharper.

The Crossing was the result of synchronizing with a weapon of Mortal Sin. In this state, I was both Greed and Fate. We had become a singular being, the sword an extension of my body. There was another huge advantage to the Crossing: I could defend against Myne's ruthless assault. When our weapons clashed, shock waves radiated out, creating

fractures that ran up the walls of nearby buildings. Until now I had only been able to defend myself, but for the first time since our fight began, I could retaliate.

“You’re not the only one who’s grown in strength,” I said, though my words fell on deaf ears.

Myne really was in a state of mind similar to when my Gluttony ravened beyond my control.

Because I was in tune with Greed, I had access to a certain amount of his wisdom and knowledge. I knew that even though Myne was in a berserker state, it wasn’t absolute. She decided on a target of her Wrath before unleashing it in its totality. I was that target.

Myne could see only me. She had no awareness of Shin or Eris. This was the power of the Crossing. Greed’s cunning and wit in battle had become my own. We thought as one. Unfortunately, I inherited his gutter mouth as well.

“Bring it on, Myne!” I shouted as I swung my sword.

She blocked my swing, but I had anticipated this. As I twisted my body, I heard the distant *boom* of a gunshot. The bullet struck the black axe’s handle, and for the briefest instant, Myne loosened her grip. I wouldn’t let this opportunity slip. I was here to fight, and I would apologize for any injuries later.

“Gah!”

I kicked Myne in the stomach with all the strength I could muster. Myne went flying until she crashed into a nearby building. I advanced swiftly, hoping to follow through, and also hoping that the blow had been enough to make Myne drop her weapon. As expected, she still had a firm grasp of the axe. I knew she wouldn’t let such an attack reach her a second time.

Myne emerged from the rubble of the demolished building as if nothing had happened. The massive chunks of debris might as well have been clouds for all she cared. She closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye, lifting her axe overhead and bringing it crashing down on me.

I twisted my body to evade the attack, only to find Myne’s kick waiting for me. Just like that, it was my turn to be buried in rubble.

“Damn it...” I muttered. “She was born for this... Not like me...”

Don't get started with that. I've got plenty of confidence in battle. Don't forget that Myne was born as a result of artificial gene manipulation and thus has a greater level of affinity with the Skills of Mortal Sin. That's why she didn't end up like Luna.

"So that's why they call themselves sisters, even though they look so different..."

You heard it from Luna yourself, didn't you? They were selected in the same research facility for their ability to survive. The genes used were identical, but there were slight differences in how they were altered. That's why they don't have to look related to be related. I, well, I was in a different research facility.

While Greed and I were in the Crossing state, his thoughts mingled in my head with my own. There was a memory I'd seen when I killed Haniel (and by extension, Luna). It was a room in a research facility full of children being examined by people in white coats. Greed had a similar memory, and it flowed into me. It was of him and Luna together for an experiment, cheerily chatting together.

Oi! Don't go sticking your nose where it doesn't belong!

Though it angered him, he couldn't stop the flow of memories. Neither of us had complete control over the Crossing, so at times we were simply made privy to one another's memories.

"I won't be able to concentrate if I keep getting flashbacks in the midst of battle."

That's why I keep telling you to focus!

Even so, I felt fortunate to get any insight into the ever-secretive Greed. It was just a pity that now wasn't the time for it. Still, Greed had promised me that when this was all over, he'd answer my questions, and I think the Crossing was a big reason he'd at last decided to open up. I'd finally have a chance to talk with him about what he knew.

"We're going to stop Myne," I said, pointing my blade at the demon of battle.

She didn't act immediately. Her power was out of control, but was there still some fragment of rationality inside her. I edged closer, waiting for the right opportunity.

"Myne!" I shouted.

And so the battle began again.

With each swing, Myne's black axe Sloth grew heavier. In terms of power, I couldn't fend off her blows with the black sword alone. I tried to dodge each of her strikes, waiting for the axe to reach the limits of its mass.

I recalled when Myne had told me about her weapon during the fight with Haniel. She said that as the weapon grew heavier, it slowed her down. If that was true, it meant that there was an upper limit to Sloth. When Sloth became too heavy to handle, I would take it. It was a straightforward plan, but it was extraordinarily difficult too.

As far as I knew, Sloth had only one secret technique: Noir Destruction. The technique released all the stored weight in the axe as a huge destructive force. I didn't even want to imagine the resulting calamity of an attack from a fully charged axe. According to Greed, Myne had avoided using higher levels of that attack in the fight against Haniel because she hadn't wanted to risk hurting me.

First, I wanted to force Sloth to reach its limit while ensuring that Myne didn't have enough space to unleash its stored mass. Then I would take it from her. If I took an attack from Myne head-on, that energy would be stored in her axe. So while I dodged her monstrous swings, I occasionally blocked some of them, always keeping note of the weight of the axe. But would Myne really let the fight continue so smoothly?

"Damn, she's anticipating my every attack."

I'd been able to dodge until now, but Myne altered her tempo. She varied the rhythm of her swings, and I was suddenly in danger of having my guts spill out.

A gunshot rang through the air and a bullet hit the axe, knocking it slightly off course and saving me.

"Eris!"

Then another support shot hit me: the Phantom Bullet. This buff created illusory clones of the recipient to confound the enemy. There were suddenly five Fates on the battlefield. Eris had powered up! When we'd sparred in the past, she had only been able to create three copies. The extra two copies were probably a result of the extra power she gained from Crossing with Envy.

I had complete control over my stats while I was Crossing with Greed. Barely dodging the axe, I sliced at Myne's stomach with a horizontal stroke.

“Greed!” I shouted. “Blunt the edge!”

Greed could freely change the sharpness of his edge. He could become sharp enough to slice through steel, or so blunt that he couldn’t cut paper. The blade slammed into Myne’s side with an audible *thud*. I had hoped that it was a solid blow, but it was never going to be so easy.

“Forgot about me, didn’t you?” Shin said.

His tentacles intercepted my blade the very instant that it should’ve collided with Myne. Eris immediately started shooting, but the bullets seemed to have no effect. Myne wasn’t about to go easy on me now that I’d lost this opportunity.

Over and over, she raised the black axe up and brought it down toward me. Unable to avoid it, I had to parry the blows with my sword. I defended against a dozen blows, each more powerful than the last. My arms went numb from the repeated shocks, and my bones screamed. The axe grew heavier and heavier. The sheer weight of it cratered the earth beneath Myne’s every step.

Shin watched from within the red liquid and cackled. “Well, I think we’re about ready,” he said, glancing around. “Do you know why I’ve stayed underground all this time? You probably thought I was hiding, but you’d be wrong.”

As I blocked more of Myne’s attacks, the ground under my feet trembled. Red liquid rose from the earth and climbed upward as if to blanket the entire city of Grandol. It would soon be high enough to obscure the artificial sun.

“The city of Grandol is mine,” said Shin, “and it now exists within me.”

The ground suddenly lost its solidity, revealing walls of writhing red flesh.

Chapter 17: The War Demon

THE WHOLE CITY was enclosed within a fleshy, red liquid, as if it were trapped in the belly of a beast.

“It has begun,” said Shin. “So then, how do you intend to stop us?”

Greed’s experience and memories flowed into me through the Crossing.

He’s going to open the Door to Distant Lands by using the people of Hausen...

The people of Hausen were directly above the city of Grandol. The red slime of Shin was going to rise like bile to consume them. Then he would pour those murdered souls into the Door, forcing it to open. To him, they were nothing more than a sacrificial offering.

“You just stay there and keep playing with Myne,” said Shin. “Meanwhile, I’ll go and make use of the people you hold so dear.”

“Like hell!”

“Is this any different from what you do, Gluttony?” asked Shin from within the slime as it reached up toward the artificial sun. “Do you not feast on souls to grant you your strength? We’re moments away. All we need is one more push—an offering of quality souls taken from the dead.”

Eris fired a barrage of bullets at Shin, but the writhing, serous flesh just absorbed all of them.

“It’s useless. I’ve cultivated my power for this very purpose,” said Shin. “You really think an attack like *that* is going to stop *me*?! What can a woman whose only skill is seduction hope to accomplish, anyway?”

Just like Eris, I wanted to stop Shin, but Myne stood in my way.

“Your opponent is Wrath, Gluttony—lest you forget. You two just go ahead and play like the quaint little Mortal Sin bearers you are.”

Eris fired with ever greater abandon, but she could barely keep

Shin at bay. She didn't have enough firepower. She still bought me some time. I had to stop Myne as soon as possible.

"Myne!"

I dodged her next swing of the black axe and countered with my sword, but Myne had anticipated my reaction and easily evaded. She was faster now, though her black axe had grown heavier. It was then that I noticed a change to Myne's forehead. Her horns grew larger, bathed in a dull light.

Her Wrath is rising. It's no different from your Gluttony skill. The angrier she becomes, the more her power increases. At the same time, her heart and her feelings wither. Myne will not back down.

"You mean she's losing herself to her Wrath?"

You already know the answer to that. She told you she lost her sense of taste, remember? That happened because of her Wrath. Long ago, she went on a rampage, and when it waned, her sense of taste was gone...and she may well have lost a lot more too.

Her huge axe moved quicker than ever. The increasing mass was supposed to slow her down, but this drawback was overcome by the power of her Wrath. The two were growing more powerful together, as if working in perfect synchrony. She had funneled her entire being into her strength, and she had the agility to put her weapon to good use. She was, at this point, simply stronger than me.

Unable to dodge her attacks, I was stuck scrambling to defend. "This is bad!" I shouted.

At this rate, I would lose the battle. With every strike, her axe grew more devastating.

I know you don't want to hurt her, but she'll kill you if nothing changes. I'm going to make the blade sharp again.

"No! I came here to stop her, not to kill her."

The black sword is easier to deflect so long as it's blunt.

"I don't care!"

The five copies of me that Eris had made with her Phantom Bullet were eviscerated in an instant.

That's a glimpse of how you'll end up if you insist on hamstringing yourself.

I wasn't in the mood to get chopped in half.

Eris fired another Phantom Bullet at me. Even as she fought tooth and nail to stop Shin's advance, she kept an eye on my situation.

She's always been like that... Acts all carefree, but always keeps an eye on those around her.

Even before my Gluttony had awakened, Eris had watched over me from the shadows. It was even possible that she was the reason Greed and I had met.

Using the confusion of the phantom copies to my advantage, I finally managed to get close enough to attack Myne. I brought the black sword down upon her right hand, apologizing in my heart for not holding anything back. I felt the jolt of impact and Myne's grip weakened ever so slightly.

Now we take the axe.

"On it."

But this was a trap. Myne had feigned injury to lure me into melee range. My attack was ineffective, and by the time I realized it, I was buffeted with fierce winds.

"Wha...?!"

Greed transformed into the black shield just in time; I managed to avoid a direct hit. Even behind the protection of the huge shield, I felt an agonizing *crack* as my left arm broke.

This was Sloth's secret technique: Noir Destruction, an attack that converted all the built-up mass of the black axe into kinetic energy. Myne had used it during our fight against Haniel, sending the monster's lower body flying. Now she unleashed the tech-art while in a state of pure Wrath, transformed into a demon of battle. The impact overwhelmed the bulwark of the black shield that Greed took so much pride in.

My Health Regen and Health Regen Boost skills began to repair my broken arm, but Myne wasn't about to back down now that I was wounded. She continued to slam her axe down while I couldn't get out of the way.

If she uses Noir Destruction even one more time, you're dead.

If she broke my right arm, I'd be out of commission. I had no

choice but to raise my own stats and unleash a secret technique of my own. When Myne attempted to use Noir Destruction again, I used the Third Level Reflection Fortress, an ability which reflected an attack back at the attacker, amplified.

“Huh?!”

Instead of reflecting her attack, Reflection Fortress clashed with Noir Destruction. Against another weapon of Mortal Sin, the technique didn’t work as it should have. It was a power struggle. The question was simple: Which was more powerful, Myne’s Noir Destruction or my Reflection Fortress?

Myne had the advantage as she was focused purely on strength.

“I’m being...overpowered.”

I felt Myne’s Wrath growing stronger even now. The black shield was being overwhelmed, and I was in danger of receiving the brunt of Noir Destruction.

Fate, you must unleash your Gluttony!

I felt like I couldn’t do it anymore. I had already entered my half-starved state. If I went past that, if I unleashed my full Gluttony, I would repeat what had happened in Galia. If I did that, I wouldn’t be able to stop Myne with no consequences, as I would become a rampaging monster.

I had promised Aaron that I would come home. I couldn’t bring myself to unleash that power.

But I still had one more trick up my sleeve, one more ally I could call upon.

“Luna!” I shouted. “Grant me your power!”

At that moment, Noir Destruction completely overpowered my shield. The force of the attack created a crater in the ground where we stood.



As the ancient buildings collapsed one after another, I slowly climbed to my feet amidst the spreading ruin. A blue barrier surrounded me, and spheres of fire drifted around me, enhancing my defense. Myne stared at what I had become and took a step backward.

“Myne,” I said, “It’s not just me you’re fighting.”

Once more, the war demon Myne uttered the name of her younger sister. “Luna...”

Chapter 18: Luna's World

IN THE PAST, I had devoured Luna's soul. Afterward, the spiritual plane she created for me had saved me again and again. She gave me succor from the effects of Gluttony, so much so that I could never thank her enough. Now Luna's wish was the same as my own: to stop Myne. These shared feelings allowed me to discover a new power of Gluttony.

My Gluttony didn't just steal a soul's powers—it also allowed me to negotiate with them. In this way, I could channel the powers of a soul as if I were a medium. It differed from the skills that were considered gifts of the Gods. In Luna (or Haniel's) case, I could access a power unique to her. The sensation was similar to that of Crossing with Greed.

Asking a soul you devoured for its help and powers was usually a foolish waste of time. The only soul to agree to such a compact was Luna, whose goals and wishes were aligned with my own. When she told me about Myne's past, we had made an agreement that she would lend me her powers. According to Greed, this new power—that of summoning souls to fight alongside me—was one that not even the previous bearer of Gluttony had acquired.

You know, it's just like you to care about the souls you devour. You're full of surprises, I'll give you that. Haniel's power will be a real boon here, so let's get on with it!

Haniel's flaming spheres circled close, protecting me. I was also surrounded by a barrier that could withstand even Myne's Noir Destruction.

We don't have much time, Fate. Luna's soul won't last long.

Using this power eroded Luna's soul, and overusing it could extinguish her soul entirely. That made it different from the Crossing; I was literally consuming the soul in order to fight with it. The more I used Haniel's power, the more the light of Luna's soul waned. But Luna was willing to accept this risk wholeheartedly to fight alongside me.

Myne was shaken by the sudden appearance of Luna's powers. I knew I only had one chance. I focused the fireballs surrounding me on

Myne's black axe and fired them from my hand. Then I expanded the barrier around me to catch Myne in it, pulling her close so she couldn't escape.

"Luna! Now!"

The area inside the barrier filled with blinding light. At the same time, I felt my consciousness grow distant.

When I opened my eyes, a world of pure white stretched out in all directions. It was the spiritual plane. Myne lay on her side, unconscious before me. We had chosen this place to talk to Myne, and to stop her. Greed and Luna had formulated this plan, anticipating that Myne's Wrath would prevent our words from reaching her in the real world. Because Shin had pushed her over the edge and turned her into a demon of battle, that was exactly what had happened.

Myne, unconscious at my feet, looked no different in this place. She still had a pair of horns sprouting from her forehead. If we woke her, our battle might well have resumed in the spiritual plane. Though I was worried, a reassuring hand clapped me on my shoulder.

"I don't know how, but you did it. Honestly, I think it was all thanks to me and the Crossing."

I turned to find Greed standing behind me in human form. He ran a hand through his red hair and smirked in a self-satisfied way.

"This isn't the time for your gloating!" I said. "Out there in the real world, Shin is trying to sacrifice the people of Hausen!"

"You still don't get it, do you?" Greed poked me in the chest. "How many times have you been here without noticing? The flow of time is different in this place."

"Oh? Really?"

"Good grief, you're unbelievable. Luna created the rules that govern this plane."

"Even the flow of time?"

"Even that. Besides, time in the physical world has always behaved differently from that in the spiritual realm."

I was so worried about Myne that I didn't truly register Greed's words. I wouldn't understand what he meant until much later.

Looking down at Myne, I found that Luna had appeared and knelt

beside her.

“I finally got to see you again, Sis,” said Luna, gently cradling Myne’s cheek in her hand. “You never did know when to stop, did you?”

Tears fell from Luna’s eyes, and a pained expression crossed Greed’s face.

“We pushed you too hard,” he said.

“It’s fine. I made my choice. I asked Fate for this.”

“Luna...you...”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m a phantom from the past. What matters to me is my sister. She’s still among the living. Fate, thank you.” Luna rose to her feet and took hold of my hand. Even here in the spiritual plane, her hand was warm.

“I... All I did was hold her still,” I said. “You’re the one who brought her here.”

“That wasn’t all you did. It’s because of you that we managed to get her here without injury. You should be proud of yourself. Don’t you think so, Greed?”

“She’s right, you know. You did good. Much better than I thought you would. You went head-to-head with a demon of battle and you didn’t back down. Not a shred of fear. And I saw it all in the Crossing, so I know better than anyone.”

It was embarrassing to hear Greed praise me that much, so unlike his usual complaints and insults.

“But this is only the beginning,” Greed said. “Luna...are you sure you’re all right?”

“You’re going to ask me that after we’ve come this far? Of course I’m okay. Anyway, the only one who can open the door to my sister’s heart is me.”

“But Luna...you know what that means.”

“I am always well aware of my capabilities. But what about you? Time to decide, Greed. You’re always so boastful, but you haven’t changed one bit.”

“I...”

“All that bravado, but really you’re a scaredy cat,” Luna teased. “I know I was a crybaby, and I could never make up my mind, but...I’ve decided. My sister is alive, here and now, and I’m going to use my power for her.”

“Fine. Do what you will...”

“I will. Now let us begin. Fate, I’m counting on you.”

Luna held her hand above the still unconscious Myne. I put my own hand above hers.

“The delve into my sister’s heart starts here. I’ll lead the way, so don’t let go. A person’s heart is a labyrinth, and if you get lost, you may not be able to return.”

I wished she hadn’t said that, but I was determined not to let go. I couldn’t let myself get stuck forever wandering, trapped in Myne’s heart. I only wanted us to live together once more, back in the real world.

“Ready?” asked Luna.

“Ready,” Greed and I said in unison.

I looked at Luna and Greed and nodded. These two were irreplaceable to me. They were the reason that I had come so far. I felt the same about Myne—perhaps she was even more important.

And so, with Luna in the lead, we took our first steps into Myne’s inner world—the world of her heart.

Chapter 19: This World of Myne

THE WORLD OF WHITE turned black, and when I opened my eyes, I was in the midst of pandemonium. I didn't know where I was, but everyone around me carried a weapon. Explosions boomed in the distance, and inhuman screams pierced the air.

"Greed?! Luna?!"

From Luna's spiritual plane, the three of us had entered Myne's soul. We should have appeared together, yet Greed and Luna were nowhere to be found. I figured I must have lost my way and ended up in the middle of a battle. Dumbfounded, I stood and stared at this unfamiliar world as a light flashed from behind.

"Whoa!"

Somehow, I managed to dart out of the way of danger. When I turned to look, I was face-to-face with a huge creature.

"A chimera?!"

Though it was a chimera, it was not like Haniel. Its core was obscured by a shield. It was then that I realized a terrible truth: I was unarmed. I had the worst luck. Not only had I gotten myself lost, I had also lost my weapon. Luna had warned me that if I wasn't careful, I could be lost in the labyrinth of a person's soul forever.

"Well, this isn't a great start."

But there was no time for complaining. The chimera advanced toward me. The people around me—probably soldiers—fired on the monster with their guns, but the attacks were of no use. This chimera was of a different class from the one I had fought. It was considerably larger, with six wings along its back.

As it prepared to fire another beam of light, a loud and powerful voice roared, "Out of the way!"

The one who spoke wielded the black sword, Greed. His skin was tanned and his hair a fiery red. He was tall, with an incredible physique that even his armor couldn't obscure. The man charged the chimera, his blade cutting through the beam of light with ease.

“Wow...” I murmured.

There was no wasted motion in his movements. He reminded me of Aaron, but this guy seemed possibly even more capable.

“I’ll take the chimera. The rest of you, do whatever you can!”

After barking his orders, the man ran toward the chimera alone. As the wielder of the black sword, I assumed he might also be the bearer of a Skill of Mortal Sin. If so, that meant he might have some idea about Myne’s location.

I picked up one of the longswords that lay scattered about and chased after the man. I could move with as much ease as in the real world, which was a good sign. It meant I could fight.

I called out to the man with red hair. “Let me help!”

“Huh? I haven’t seen you around before. Black hair, black eyes... You’re not Galian, are you?”

“I...”

“Tell me later. The more allies, the better. We’re losing men out here quicker than we can count,” he said, his voice blunt and direct.

Then he put a hand out to stop me when I reached him.

“But,” he continued, “that chimera belongs to me. You have no idea how ravenous I am. Well, how much my skill hungers. It’s not going to calm down unless I eat that thing.”

The man took off at high speed, his black sword shining. The chimera launched explosive pinions from its wings, but the man dealt with them as if time had stopped for him. He only took one swing, a vertical slash straight through the chimera’s core, splitting it in half.

“Hoo yeah! That’s the stuff! Too bad these big ones never seem to hit the spot!”

Now there was absolutely no mistaking it: this was the bearer of Gluttony.

I had felt the same when I devoured a chimera—oddly underwhelmed. According to Greed, the chimera were a failed experiment.

“I’m gonna regret eating that later. Anyway, what’s your story?” The red-haired man turned his back on the collapsed chimera and looked at me.

“I’m...Fate. I, uh...I got lost.”

The man chortled. “Lost? Here? In the middle of a battlefield? You *are* interesting. But you offered to help me, and you had the guts to stand up to a chimera. I like you, kid. Call me Kairos.”

Kairos grabbed my hand and pulled me along as he walked. He was clearly the pushy type.

“I’ll show you around the base,” he said. “Nothing to eat around here anyway. Can’t go fighting on an empty stomach and so on—especially in my case. I’m useless if I don’t eat.”

“Thank you. To be honest, I can’t make any sense of this place.”

“Yeah, I can tell. It’s written all over your face. Fate, right? Here’s a free piece of advice: The battlefield is no place for your feelings.”

“I hear that a lot.”

Kairos roared with laughter. “That being said, they say honesty is a virtue too. Probably especially the case, given the current state of the world.”

Kairos sheathed his sword and gave me a charming grin. Now that the chimera had fallen, the enemy formation broke and they began to retreat.

“No more fighting today. We may have to face an even harder battle when they rally and launch another offensive, so we need to get our rest while we can.”

I stared at the black sword hanging from Kairos’s side. “That’s an amazing sword. It’s powerful enough to cleave a huge beast in half.”

“This here is Greed. He’s the rudest bastard I know, but he’s a good guy deep down.”

“Who’re you calling a rude bastard, Kairos?”

“Sorry, sorry. No need to get salty. As you can see, the sword talks.”

Kairos gave the sword a friendly pat. It wasn’t the Greed I knew—this one didn’t need to use Telepathy to speak and could make his opinions known to anyone he wanted. That meant Kairos had unlocked Greed’s Fifth Level. That was unexplored territory for me.

I looked around. Was this really the region of Galia? It was so different from the place I knew: a vast, barren wasteland that teemed

with bizarre flora. Even though this land was gouged and scarred by the ongoing war, the native plant life still flourished.

“Eyes up, soldier,” said Kairos. “The base is north of here. Let’s go.”

“Right behind you, Sir Kairos.”

“None of that ‘sir’ stuff, thanks. Kairos is fine. That’s what everyone calls me.”

I followed Kairos north. After some time, a familiar black wall came into sight.

“Babylon...”

“Babylon? What’s that?”

“Oh. Uh, it’s nothing.” It seemed like it didn’t have that name here.

Kairos gave me a curious look, but then his eyes lit up. “I like it. Babylon! They’ve been on my back about naming this place for forever. I’m taking that.”

“Uh...you’re going to make your decision just like that?”

“Yeah. If they don’t like it, it’s their fault for making me come up with a name in the first place.”

As we drew closer, I realized that it was different from the Babylon I knew. It was not yet that Babylon, but it would one day become it. This place was still being built.

“We don’t have enough material,” said Kairos. “We take the adamantite from the enemy, but it ain’t easy. I’d rather be fighting. At least that’s straightforward.”

Kairos called out his thanks to the workers on the wall as he walked. We had been in the thick of battle mere moments ago, but he showed no signs of exhaustion whatsoever. None of the side effects of Gluttony seemed to manifest either.

When he was done with the workers, Kairos showed me the way to some lodgings.

“First things first: food.”

“Uh...why are you treating me so well?”

“I told you already. I like you. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“You’ve got a familiar scent. We can recognize one of our own. Right?”

I was thrown for a loop. *Should I tell him that I’m another bearer of Gluttony?*

I hesitated without answering until Kairos shrugged it off.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. My silence didn’t faze him in the least. “By the way, we got a new recruit not too long ago. Same as you.”

“New recruit?”

“Yeah, over there. All by her lonesome in the corner again. She’s one hell of a monster in battle, but as soon as the fighting stops, she keeps to herself. Not sure what to do about it.”

Kairos smiled as he spoke. He indicated a girl with a ruddy, tanned complexion, bone-white hair, and deep red eyes that made you flinch. She sat holding her knees in the corner and gazed up at the sky.

“Myne?!”

I was so surprised that I spoke louder than I would’ve liked. Some people turned to look at us, surprised. As soon as Kairos heard me, his eyes shone with a fitful luster as an idea came to mind.

“You two know each other? That’s great! You can help make her feel at home. I’m counting on you, Fate!”

Kairos left to attend to other business, leaving me alone with Myne’s piercing gaze. I shouldn’t have been surprised, since I had literally just shouted her name.

Chapter 20: In Memories

MYNE STARED AT ME for a time. She wasn't dressed in the white garb I was used to. Instead, her clothes were pure black. As our eyes met, she gave off the impression that she wished to be left alone. After glaring for a moment, she simply turned away. I couldn't give up yet, so I approached her.

"Hey, Myne," I said.

Myne sat still on a pile of building materials and held her knees. "Who are you?"

As expected, I thought. It was no different from my encounter with Greed earlier. In this realm, we had never met before. But if this was the world of Myne's soul, I had to get on good terms with her for a start. I'd never be able to talk with her if I didn't.

"I'm Fate," I said.

"Fate..."

"I got caught up in the fighting earlier, but Kairos saved me. Then he brought me here. Why are you here?"

"I fought Kairos and lost. They took Sloth away from me."

"So you're here because they won't return your weapon?"

"Yeah."

"You're certainly in a bind."

I plunked myself down next to Myne, and we both looked up and watched the people building the outer wall.

"Where did you come from?" Myne asked.

She probably asked because of my appearance. Kairos had been just as surprised to see my black hair and black eyes. It was obvious that I wasn't Galian, lacking their distinctive tanned complexions.

"I came from a place far, far from here."

"From the borderlands?"

I couldn't tell her I'd come from the real world, not yet. Myne's

soul was still entangled in these moments from the past—these memories. All I could do for now was blend in with my surroundings.

“Yeah, something like that,” I said. “Perhaps I moved too soon. This place seems awfully inhospitable.”

“It wasn’t always like this. The metropolises have spread all over. Kairos and the others are building that wall from their rubble.”

“Who is Kairos fighting?”

“He’s not fighting an individual. He’s fighting the Galian Empire. I’m a prisoner of war.”

He was fighting an empire? Given the size of the battle I saw, it made sense. There was no other word for it but war. I was still intrigued by Myne’s choice of words. “You don’t seem especially imprisoned for a prisoner of war,” I said.

“I failed in my mission. I have no home to return to. He knows that as well as I do.”

From context, I realized that she was an assassin sent by the empire.

“But I don’t understand what reason *you’d* have for being here,” Myne spat.

“You mean why I would come to such a dangerous place?”

“Yes. And I can feel a similar power in you. It’s not unlike ours, but it is more akin to the power of Kairos.”

“So that’s one of the reasons you’ve decided to talk to me, right?”

Myne nodded wordlessly. Bearers of Skills of Mortal Sin could recognize one another. I could feel it too, like she had a magnetic pull. And once we came together, it became difficult for us to move apart.

“That’s part of it,” Myne said. “And I don’t know why, but...I feel soothed when I talk to you. Have we... Have we met somewhere?” Her crimson eyes carefully studied my face. Though she seemed to be trapped in the past, perhaps some small part of the real her was here as well.

What should I do? How should I answer?

“I...”

Just as I was about speak, Kairos called out to us. “Hey, you two.

Food's ready. Can't fight on an empty stomach."

"I don't have the will to fight," said Myne.

"Don't be like that. We need you. Fate, you too. Come on." Kairos pulled us both to our feet and pushed Myne along. "You always talk like that, but you always eat the most."

I was certainly familiar with that phenomenon. Myne's appetite was something else. Kairos watched as Myne walked ahead of us and said, "I'm supposed to be the Glutton, but she eats even more than I do."

"Where do you get your food supplies from?" I asked.

"From the empire. We had another platoon take advantage of that last battle to acquire a new stockpile."

"Wait, so that means..."

"Exactly. We're doing it Gluttony-style. Always stealing, always taking. Not that I want that for you..."

"Kairos... What do you mean?"

"So! Let's eat, and then we'll dive back into battle."

The food at the camp was underwhelming. Even so, Kairos was content just to have some filling grub and wolfed down the food. Myne, sitting by his side, ate quietly. She'd lost her sense of taste in the past, so everything tasted the same to her. I had a feeling her opinion would be the same as Kairos's, but I figured I would make small talk and ask.

"What do you think of the food, Myne?"

"It's disgusting. The stuff at the facility was better," she said.

"Huh?!"

"What?"

"You can taste it?" I asked.

"Of course I can. I may be taciturn, but you'll know when I don't like something."

"Really?!"

"Enough already."

Myne was getting angry. But now I knew that in this time, Myne still had her sense of taste. She hadn't yet lost it. Her personality hadn't

changed a bit, though.

“If you’re still hungry, you can have mine,” I said.

“Ooh.”

Myne’s eyes lit up as she dug into my leftovers. Naturally, she’d cleared her own plate a while ago.

Kairos looked at her and laughed. “Guess I won’t need to give you my share this time. For a prisoner of war, she’s a real handful, I’ll tell you that. You sure you’ll be okay, Fate? It’s tough dealing with hunger out here.”

“I’m used to it,” I said with a sigh.

Kairos laughed again. “It’s not a good idea to get too used to *that* feeling.”

We watched as Myne shoveled the food into her maw.

“She’s definitely going to be asking for thirds, isn’t she, Fate?”

“Definitely.”

“Some things will never change, I guess.”

When Myne was finished, she went back to her corner. Kairos watched her go.

“Looks like she’s had her fill,” he said. Then he noticed me watching him. “Hm? What’s up?”

“Kairos, why do you fight?” I asked.

“Why? Well... In the beginning, it was simply to live. That’s still why. No great noble reasons or anything like that.” He looked out at the people putting together what would one day become Babylon. “But suddenly, I found myself with a family.”

“You fight to live?”

“I do. I fight so we can live as human beings. Everyone you see here—we were the empire’s playthings. We are the ones who escaped. Eventually, we drifted together and chose to rebel. D’you remember that chimera we fought earlier? If I hadn’t escaped, I might have ended up as one of them.”

Kairos told me that the Galian Empire used people for its experiments. Every person was assigned a position in the hierarchy, and those citizens with the lowest rank were afforded no human rights. For

the sake of researching skills—the gifts given to people by God—anything and everything was permitted. The true goal of the empire’s research was to understand and develop even more powerful skills. It was only through the help of brave researchers who objected to these experiments that Kairos and the others had been able to escape to the world beyond.

“The person who freed me...died,” said Kairos. “Their last words were ‘You must live.’ I have survived for so long because of those words. I’ve almost succumbed to Gluttony more than a few times, but those words always brought me back.”

Kairos looked like he had better mastery over Gluttony than I did, but perhaps our situations were more alike than I’d first thought.

“So even you...struggle with your Gluttony?” I asked.

“You probably know better than anyone else. I’ve never once thought of this skill as a special power. To me, it’s a curse. How about you, Fate?”

“I... I’d be lying if I said I didn’t sometimes feel that way. But if I didn’t have this power, I couldn’t protect the people I care about. I wouldn’t be the person I am now.”

“Yeah, I know that feeling.”

I knew that the Galian Empire would eventually fall. Kairos and his supporters would win the war, and Kairos himself would die. That’s what Greed had told me—it was an established, historical fact without doubt.

I felt a piercing gaze and turned to find Myne staring at me.

Chapter 21: Hall of Memories

“I’M SORRY FOR GETTING you wrapped up in all of this, Fate,” Kairos said, draping an arm over my shoulder.

He spoke energetically, as if he wanted to lighten the mood that clung to us like an oppressive pall. Though he was blunt with his words, he had a good heart.

“We’re going to infiltrate a particular facility. We’ve got someone on the inside, and their last message said this is our only chance to make a move.”

“Okay,” I said. “But is it okay to trust me with a plan like this?”

After all, I thought, I literally appeared out of nowhere.

“This isn’t a case of needing more time to get to know each other,” Kairos said.

“Then what is it a case of?”

“All we need are similar goals. I can tell you’re interested in Galia. And I also saw the spark in your eyes when I told you about the facility. That’s more than enough for me.”

“A little too quick to trust people, no?”

“You think so? I’ve always been like this. I’d love a world where I could trust everyone, but it’s not always so simple,” said Kairos. Then he addressed Myne. “I’ve returned Sloth to you, and now you have to hold up your end of the deal.”

“Fine,” Myne replied, axe in hand. “And when I’m done, so’s our agreement.”

“Hey now. You’re not angling for a rematch, are you?”

“I am. I will take your head home with me.”

“Why waste your time...?” Kairos sighed, gazed up at the sky, and then laughed heartily. “Okay! Then we’ll fight until you’re satisfied. Not as if you can win.”

“I won’t lose again,” she hissed.

The tension between them was thick, and I didn't want to get caught up in it. In any case, Kairos was clearly open to the challenge. *If you want it, come get it*, his aura said.

Myne always stuck to her values above all. It was the only thing stopping her from breaking her promise and starting the fight right then and there. I chuckled; the Myne in this place was just like the Myne I knew in the real world.

"Something funny?"

Myne's glare threatened to crush me. It was the glower of Wrath. Nonetheless, I noticed that the heavy atmosphere that pressed down on us in Babylon had dissipated. It seemed like Kairos succeeded in lightening the mood. Greed, who had been silently watching the whole time, sounded the alarm.

"All right, enough of the buddy-buddy stuff. We've got enemies incoming."

"Nice work, Greed."

"I don't need your flattery. But, Kairos...don't overdo it."

An enormous horde of monsters encroached upon us, a few chimeras among them. Kairos had said the empire regularly sent stampedes like this to their base.

"Guess we've got our warmup waiting for us. Fate, Myne, are you ready?"

"Yes," Myne and I replied in unison.

I drew the longsword that Kairos had given to me. I was worried about its durability, but the Weapon of Mortal Sin I was most used to was currently in Kairos's hands. The only weapon capable of withstanding the force of my power was this longsword. All the same, I felt an uneasy chill run through me. To think that a battle without Greed would leave me feeling so nervous... I was becoming acutely aware of just how much I relied on him.

"Leave no survivors," said Kairos. "Any that make it past us will reach Babylon."

He unsheathed the black sword and transformed it into the black bow. As he poured his stats into the weapon, it began to grow. With a smooth, flowing motion, he unleashed the Bloody Ptarmigan attack.

“Huh?!”

The power of the attack was on another level. It didn't look like he had sacrificed a significant portion of his stats, which provided further evidence that I was still a long way from having mastery of Greed's abilities.

With half of the incoming force annihilated, I didn't sense any lingering reverberations of Gluttony from Kairos.

“Whoo! Nothing quite like reaping such a filling harvest! That's one reason I love the Bloody Ptarmigan!”

“You can pat yourself on the back later!” said Greed. “You still have the other half to deal with!”

“Don't be so dour, Greed. You worry too much!”

“Hmph.”

Kairos's opening strike did its job. Unleashing an attack of such incredible power routed the remaining monsters and they began to scatter.

“Now's our chance!” said Kairos as he broke into a sprint. Myne and I followed close behind.

This was an opportunity to find out if my Gluttony skill worked in this world. I started small, decapitating a charging orc. It collapsed, blood spurting from its neck, but no metallic voice rang in my ears to inform me of a stat increase. I slew other nearby monsters indiscriminately, but still heard nothing from my Gluttony. Collecting spheres didn't bring me any closer to leveling either.

I shouldn't have expected anything, I thought. This isn't the real world, after all.

As Kairos sliced through another chimera, he shouted, “Fate, stop standing around! You can slack off as much as you like when we're done!”

Myne looked no different than what I was used to. As far as she was concerned, these monsters weren't worth her time, even as a warmup. The wave of monsters stretched to the horizon, but she decimated them with ease.

“That's the last of them,” said Kairos, lopping the head off a monster I didn't recognize. “Fate, Myne, good work!”

“What...is that monster?” I asked.

“No idea. Probably a new species. I’ve noticed them mixed in with the others. They’re manageable for now,” Kairos said. “When I first encountered them, they were about as strong as orcs. Now they’re on par with chimera.”

“Isn’t that bad?”

“Not for me. They’re delicious. For my Gluttony, the stronger the better.”

“Ah...”

I wasn’t sure what to make of Kairos’s reply. He didn’t seem to mind the effects of Gluttony at all; he was already eager for another round. Was this guy really the bearer of Gluttony? It was hard to believe so when he could devour these monsters’ souls without concern.

“Let’s keep going,” said Kairos. “A little farther and we’ll be able to see it.”

But Kairos’s idea of “a little farther” was atypical, and we soon found ourselves deep in the heart of Galia. From what I could remember, I felt certain we were in the area that would one day become the great canyon.

A black edifice towered above us—a research facility. It was massive, easily on par with the underground city beneath Hausen. It sprawled out so far that I wasn’t sure if we were really looking at a single facility.

“This is the place we’re breaking into?” I asked.

“Yep.”

Kairos’s voice was as clear and calm as always. It was like he literally didn’t know the meaning of fear. In this situation, Myne was our greatest liability. Stealth was *not* her forte. During our travels, she had always been the type to break down the front gate and storm inside.

Myne noticed my worried look and turned her nose up at me. “I’ll do this better than you.”

“Really? You don’t look like you can do ‘subtle.’”

“You’re talking to the assassin who almost killed Kairos,” Myne said, her chest puffed up with pride.

Kairos chuckled. That laugh was enough to tell me that she had barged in through the front gates or otherwise immediately failed at stealth.

“All you gotta do is keep quiet. Everything’s been prepared in advance, so just don’t make a scene,” Kairos said. “Well? Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Come on, this way.”

Kairos led us toward the infiltration point.

Chapter 22: The Galian Lab

WE STOPPED AT A SPOT a little to the east of the research facility.

“This is it,” said Kairos.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see for yourself when we get there. Try not to breathe through your nose.”

Because of the smell? What is he talking about? A few moments later, Myne and I both knew exactly what he meant.

“It’s their sewer,” Kairos said. “This is where all their wastewater ends up.”

“We’re really going in through the sewer?”

“We are. What of it?” Kairos’s face said it all: *What’s the big deal?*

Myne scrunched up her face in disgust. This wasn’t like the Myne I knew.

“According to our intel, the sewer is the biggest weakness in their security,” Kairos explained. “Furthermore, our person on the inside dealt with the security measures they do have, at least temporarily.”

“Can we trust them?”

“I figured you’d say that. You don’t have to trust them. Trust *me*.”

Kairos said some strange things at times, but he could be pretty persuasive when he wanted. I felt like I *wanted* to believe in him. Perhaps that feeling was enough to have persuaded the people of Babylon to take up arms in rebellion against the Galian Empire.

My foot sloshed in the sewer water. A shiver ran up my spine.
Ewwwwwwwwwwww.

“Hurry up,” said Kairos. “Don’t fall behind.”

I began to follow after Kairos, but stopped when I noticed that the other member of our team hadn’t budged at all.

“Myne! If you don’t hurry, you’ll get left behind,” I said.

“You can’t expect me to do this. My dignity as a young maiden is at stake.”

I had never once imagined the words “young maiden” would come from Myne’s lips. I was so surprised that I burst into laughter.

Myne smacked me on the head with the flat of her axe.

“Ow! What the hell?!”

“Cause and effect, idiot!”

I could feel a lump forming on my head. Why was she so violent?! And why did she always default to arrogance?!

“Fine, fine,” I said. “Climb on my shoulders and I’ll carry you. That way you won’t have to worry about touching any sewage.”

“But that’s...so embarrassing.”

Oh, come on! Are you joking?!

Myne didn’t even know the meaning of shame. How could she possibly feel embarrassed by the idea of simply riding on my shoulders? This was the same girl who’d appeared in front of me in just her underwear. She hadn’t been embarrassed then. In fact, she’d flaunted it. Thinking back on the incident made my face flush red.

Is this Myne an imposter? A fake? She must be!

She was a lot like the Myne I knew, with that mostly expressionless face, but her range of emotions was totally different. Who was this girl, really?

She continued to fidget nervously as I said, “Okay, in that case, you’ll have to keep watch out here and wait for us. I’ll go tell Kairos.”

Myne clenched her fists until the knuckles whitened and said, “Wait. Okay, I’ll... I’ll do it.”

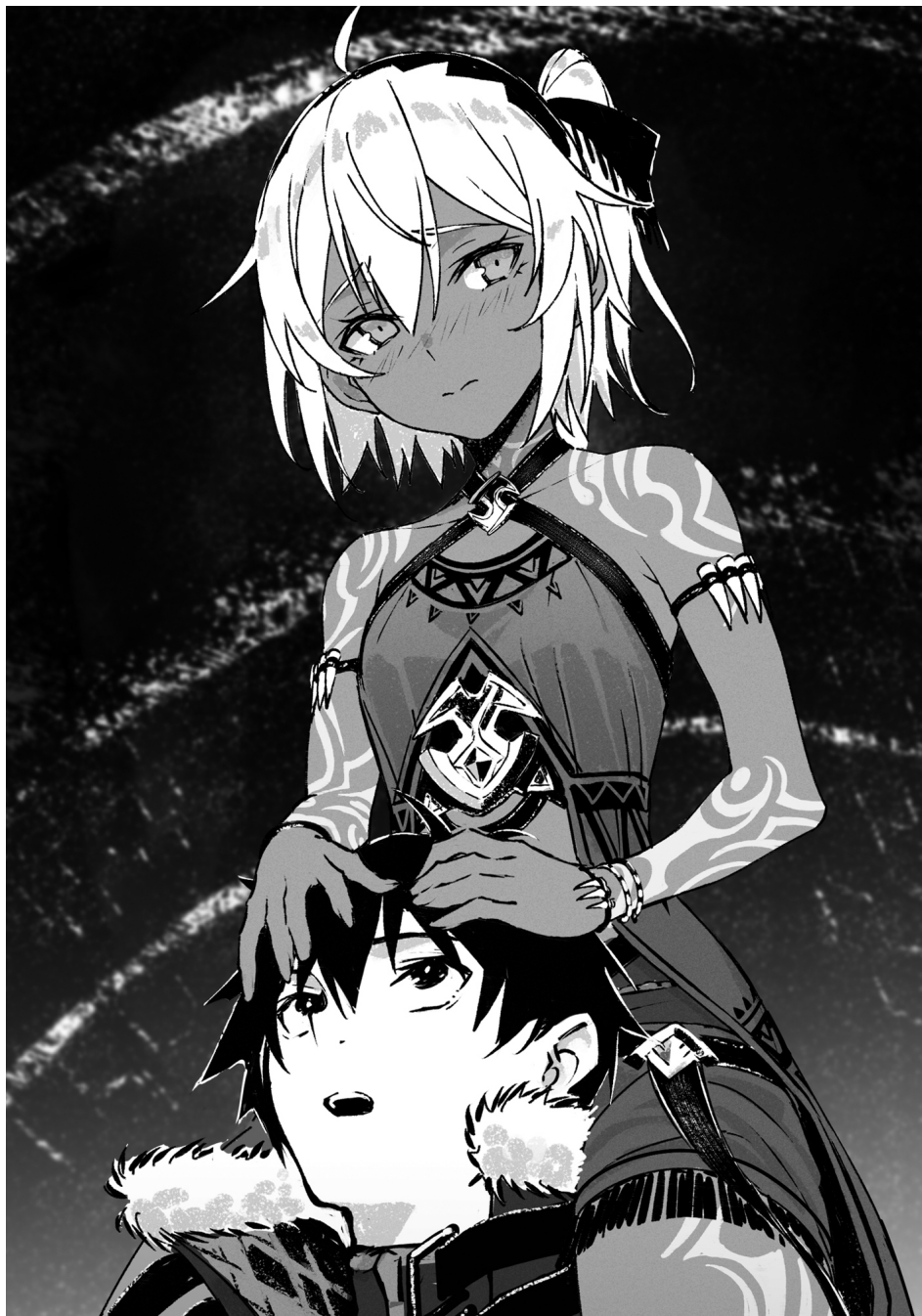
With slow, laborious movements, she climbed onto my shoulders.

“So heavy! We’re going to sink! I can’t...handle it. We’re... sinking...”

“How could you say something so rude to a woman in the bloom of youth?! Do you realize my dignity is at stake?!”

“You’ve got the wrong idea! Quit squirming. It’s not you, it’s Sloth! Have you released the axe’s weight since that last battle?”

“Oh... I forgot.”



Myne seemed to be a little embarrassed by her assumption. After things had settled down, we caught up to Kairos, who casually flicked our foreheads in turn.

“Idiots... Have you heard of stealth?!”

“Sorry!” we chimed in unison.

“You sound confident in your answers, but I’m losing my confidence in *you* real quick...”

Kairos told us that if we made too much noise again, he would dunk us headfirst into the sewage. Of course, I wanted to avoid such a fate at all costs. We proceeded with utmost discretion.

“See? You *can* do it. Then again, we’re in for a world of hurt if you can’t keep this up...” Kairos seemed almost resigned to that conclusion, but soon he pointed up at a light gleaming from above. “There. We’ll take the ladder against the wall. I’ll go first.”

There was no way I was going to be able to climb the ladder with Myne on my shoulders.

“Okay. You next, Myne,” I said.

“Got it.”

She leaped from my shoulders to the ladder and began to climb, careful not to drop her axe as she went. I grabbed a rung of the ladder and looked up only for Myne to scream, “No looking up! That’s not allowed!”

“How am I supposed to climb, then?”

“You climb the ladder, but you keep your peeping eyes pointed *down*. If you don’t, I’ll drop this axe on your head.”

Myne seemed like she was embarrassed about my potentially looking up and seeing her underwear. This had to be a joke. The Myne I knew was arrogant and shameless—a flash of her undergarments certainly shouldn’t have been enough to faze her.

“You’re still looking! I’m going to drop the axe!”

“Whoa! Stop! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

“You two!” Kairos barked. “Shut your traps!”

When we finally reached the top of the ladder, we were met by a woman wearing a white lab coat. Her skin was tanned and her white

hair was tinted purple. Behind her glasses, her eyes glimmered with intelligence.

“Why hello there. As for the two of you behind Kairos, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Micuria. I’m sure Kairos has already informed you, but I’m his help on the inside. Come along now. You too, Kairos. You stink.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“One ‘yeah’ is enough!”

“She’s strict about the strangest things...” Kairos muttered under his breath as he was dragged by his collar into another room. Myne and I darted after him.

“Wait for us,” I said.

“That woman’s got him wrapped around her finger. Tougher than she looks.”

Myne showed unexpected interest in Kairos, but to me, it just looked like he was getting pushed around.

We entered a room that looked like a private office. As expected, Micuria gave us a brief tour.

“This is my research office. There’s a shower over there, and I suggest you make use of that with all due haste. In the meantime, I’ll launder your clothes. No need to worry; they’ll dry in no time.”

Kairos disappeared into the shower first. Myne and I looked around Micuria’s office.

“You stink, Fate,” said Myne. “You need a shower, and quick.”

“I got a little extra filth on me, but that’s because I had to carry a certain someone on my shoulders,” I said, looking down at my soiled clothes.

Myne hesitated before she said, “About that... Thanks.”

Whoa, are you for real?! Did this version of Myne just thank me for something?!

No matter how hard I worked, and no matter what I did, the Myne I knew always acted like that was the way things were supposed to be. I liked this new version of her! The version I knew loved counting money and always stole my food. But that girl didn’t seem to exist here, and I had the overwhelming urge to congratulate her with a pat on the head.

“You’re so well-behaved,” I said as I gave into the temptation and actually tousled Myne’s hair.

“What are you doing?!”

As I pulled my hand back, she almost chomped my fingers off. Seemed like this cat was still a tiger after all. She showed me a gentler side, but the moment I was lulled into a false sense of security, her killer instincts awoke and she struck back, aiming for the kill. Then again, if she hadn’t had that side, she wouldn’t have been Myne.

“What’s so funny?!” Myne said. “Why do you always laugh when you look at me?”

Every word was punctuated with a poke to my chest. This wasn’t some mere irritated gesture. Myne’s prodding felt like I was getting hammered in the heart. It was enough to make me cough.

Micuria giggled as she looked on. “You two get along like a house on fire, huh?”

“What? No we don’t!”

Myne vanished into a nearby room. I wasn’t sure if it was good manners to do so without permission, but when I looked at Micuria, she simply nodded with a smile.

“It’s fine,” she said. “There’s nothing in there I don’t want her to see, and it’s not a problem even if she trashes it.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

“I should formally introduce myself. I’m Micuria, the deputy director of this research facility. Kairos and I, well, we have something of a history. It’s a long story.”

“I’m Fate. The girl who ran off is Myne.”

“He was supposed to come here by himself, but instead he shows up with you two in tow. I have to admit, I was surprised. Regardless, I am glad to make your acquaintance, Fate.”

Micuria held out a hand, and I shook it.

“Huh?”

In the instant our hands touched, my mind flooded with a vision of red. This couldn’t have been Telepathy because this wasn’t the real world. Whatever it was, I couldn’t stop the vision from forcing its way in.

I saw Kairos try to kill Micuria as the research facility became an inferno around them. Micuria's consciousness faded as her neck was crushed. Kairos wept through red-rimmed eyes. With what little strength she had left, Micuria put her hands on Kairos's own and tried to speak. However, her lips wouldn't move. She couldn't even manage a whisper.

"Fate? Is something wrong?"

"Hm?!"

The sound of my name brought me out of the vision and back to Micuria's office. I had stood rooted to the spot, apparently staring at the floor.

"It must have been a difficult trip to get here," said Micuria. "And I know Kairos can be quite rough. You should probably take a rest after your shower. I've still got things to finish up, so we can get started when I'm done."

Micuria took a seat and studied the panel in front of her. The panel displayed some sort of research material or experimental results, and Micuria was revising it. I took a peek at the screen and the word "superorganism" leaped out at me.

Huh?! But that's what I'm fighting, back in the real world. That's Shin.

"Hey. No spying on classified materials, young man. It's bad manners."

"Sorry."

I didn't get a chance to read anything else on the panel. I did catch that there were a variety of diversion methods, however. Was Micuria trying to use a superorganism to create something? Even if she was, she wasn't about to discuss classified research with a complete stranger like me. As if in confirmation, when I tried to peek again, she gave me an irritated look.

"Looks like Kairos is out of the shower, so run along and take one yourself," she said.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Fine, but make it quick."

"Did you create the superorganism?"

"I did. Now go take your shower."

Micuria gave me a shove in the back, so I gave up and headed for the shower.

Kairos looked refreshed as he passed me by and gently tapped my cheek. "I know you can't see what's ahead and it's got you feeling like you're treading water, but it'll all be clear soon enough."

"What do you mean?"

"First things first: Go take your shower."

Kairos also pushed me toward the shower. He was right. I really needed to clean all this grime off of me.

I'd gone into this mission anxious and unsure of what to expect, but this had all gone so smoothly that I could hardly believe it. Even our battle with that horde of monsters earlier had been more trouble than this. In any case, I listened to their advice and allowed myself a little rest as I showered.

Chapter 23: The Researcher Micuria

I CAME OUT of the shower fully refreshed and found that all the equipment I'd left on the shelves was now clean. I had no idea what had happened while I was in the shower, but perhaps some kind of Galian technology had cleaned my clothes.

After dressing and equipping myself, I returned to Micuria and Kairos. They were huddled close to the panel Micuria was working on and deep in conversation. Kairos noticed me and quickly motioned me over.

"Fate, come here. Got something to show you."

Unlike before, Micuria was all smiles and good cheer. Perhaps Kairos had persuaded her to trust me. I didn't know what they were looking at, but I was excited to see what was on that panel.

"Wait," I said, disappointed. "This is just a map of the facility..."

"What the hell kind of a reaction is that?" said Kairos.

I couldn't hide my frustration. I had hoped to see top-secret Galian tech or something, but I'd gotten my hopes up for nothing more than a plain old map.

"Don't look so down in the dumps," Kairos continued. "Don't you know that this map is top secret? The correct response is 'Oh, great Micuria! I thank you from the bottom of my heart!' Isn't that right, Micuria?"

"Stop it already! Why do you insist on this idiocy?!" Micuria flicked Kairos's forehead. "This buffoon aside, I do want to show you why I called you here."

Micuria pointed to an area in the basement of the research facility. The map was three-dimensional, and she zoomed in so we could see it more clearly.

I studied the panel carefully, but I was still left scratching my head. "There's nothing there."

"That's right. Not yet. But if we do this..."

Micuria put a hand to the map, and with a quick gesture, the map transformed. Where once there was nothing, there was now a wide-open area in the basement.

“What...is that?”

“I called you here to find out. Now that I’ve got two more of you than I expected, it should be at least twice as easy, no?” Micuria looked at Kairos with a grin.

“Yeah, I don’t mind going to find out what’s down there, but I do want to know what exactly you’re after,” said Kairos. “You only ever research the dangerous stuff. So let me guess—you want us to kill whatever we find down there.”

“Bingo. If that’s even possible, then that’s the best solution. That being said, given the unique nature of your skill, Kairos, it’s incredibly dangerous for you to kill something you know nothing about.”

“So, it’s not as simple as feeding and fleeing, then. Well, that’s disappointing.”

“I can’t believe you sometimes. If you keep this up, one day you won’t be able to endure it any longer. You’ll turn into a real monster. I can’t let that happen. I can’t let that be the end...”

“I’ll be fine.”

Micuria sighed. “Fate, please. Say something.”

I’d seen how Kairos fought on our way here. It was hard to believe that he was even the bearer of Gluttony. It seemed like devouring souls had almost no effect on him whatsoever, whereas I always struggled to keep Gluttony under control even with Luna’s help. Without her, I doubted that I could have made it this far. I’d even felt the full force of my Gluttony when I fought the Divine Dragon.

“Relax, guys,” said Kairos. “I’ve got my Gluttony under control. Recently, I can binge as much as I want and feel fine. I barely feel hungry anymore. If you ask me, I’m probably close to complete mastery of the skill.”

“Don’t be daft. It’s not a skill you *can* master. You’ve always suffered because of your Gluttony—always. And suddenly it’s gone quiet? What you described makes me more worried than relieved.”

“Isn’t it good news? I can finally use this power for good. I’m a changed man.”

"You haven't changed. Nothing has. Look." Micuria gestured to some kind of scientific data. It showed levels well above normal. The data resembled what Laine had shown me back at the kingdom. The difference, however, was that it was much worse for Kairos.

"It's a wonder you're even breathing," said Micuria. "That's the other reason I called you here."

"I don't have the time."

"Don't be like that. Once you've finished exploring the basement, come directly back here so we can stabilize you. We have to do what we can. Here in the facility, more and more people are unhappy with how the empire is being run. Yes, power is important, but right now the most important thing is *time*. We need you. What would we have left if something happened to you?"

"Fine. I'll come back once we're done. This was the real reason you called me here, wasn't it?"

"Does it matter?"

From where I stood, Micuria's true intentions couldn't have been more obvious.

According to Micuria, something was growing in the basement area she'd shown us. At first, it had needed little in the way of sustenance, so it had slipped through her analysis. However, in recent times, greater and greater quantities of supplies were being brought down to it.

"From what I can gather, it's some kind of unknown biological weapon, and it grows extremely quickly."

"So the faster we kill it, the better, right?"

"Not yet. More and more people are ready to join you, Kairos. We just need a little more time. What's going on in the basement is concealed from the vast majority of researchers here, myself included. We can use that information to bring them to our side."

"You think? I'm not sold yet. The people here... None of them ever considered *us* people. To them, we were just lab rats."

"That was true in the past, yes. Have you forgotten that I used to be just like them? Look at me now—I'm working with you."

"Hmph."

“Here, take this.” Micuria passed Kairos a compact image-recording device, small enough to fit in the palm of his hand.

Kairos handed it to me. “Fate, you’re on camera duty.”

“I gave that to *you*, Kairos!” said Micuria.

“Look, we both know that I’m the guy that does the fighting. I won’t have time to snap some pictures.”

“Unbelievable. If you get into a full-blown fight down there, you’ll bring this facility down on top of you!”

“You’ll gather everyone and evacuate them long before that happens. I’m counting on it, Deputy Director.”

“Kairos, you... Never mind. You’d best get going. The monitoring systems are down; you only need to worry about running into actual people.” Micuria handed Kairos the panel with the map of the complex.

Kairos once again juggled it from his right hand to his left and passed it to me. “Fate, you’re on map duty. I’m no good with maps.”

“No sense of direction?”

“If I was *that* bad, we’d never have made it here, right?”

That was true. Kairos probably just didn’t want to be bothered with figuring out a route to the basement. At least now I knew why he’d brought me along.

I realized that I hadn’t seen Myne since she disappeared, so I wandered over to the next room to look for her.

“Ah, so she’s sleeping...” I muttered.

Real adventurers knew to rest whenever they had the chance. Myne had taught me this herself. This girl had fought Kairos, lost, became a prisoner of war, and was now working for her captor. If I were in her shoes, I wouldn’t have been able to sleep nearly so soundly, if I could even manage to sleep in the first place. I placed a hand on Myne’s forehead.

“Something happened here, something that trapped you in your past. If I stay with you and Kairos, will you show me what that is...?”

But Myne, in her sleep, did not hear my words. “I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I’m so sorry. I never meant to... I... No...”

She was having a nightmare, and it contorted her usually stoic

face into a mask of anguish.

Chapter 24: Fated Encounters

KAIROS'S EYES WIDENED in dismay when I emerged from the room where Myne napped.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed. "You're a mess!"

"You know the saying 'Don't wake a sleeping tiger'?"

"Ah, I see. A tiger. Now I understand."

Myne had been cross with me because I stayed to watch her until she woke up. When she noticed me, she became embarrassed that I had watched her sleep, so she bit me.

"He tried to take advantage of me while I slept. Unbelievable," said Myne.

"Fate! Why, you—" Kairos started.

"You've got it all wrong! I'm innocent! I was just trying to wake her up!"

"Just trying to wake her up, huh?"

"Not you too, Micuria..."

The two of them *knew* I had just gone in there to wake her up. They were bullying me! It seemed that even this far in her past, Myne didn't like getting woken up. I could feel Wrath emanating from her.

"Enough kidding around," said Kairos. "We're moving out. You two ready?"

"Ready," we replied.

Kairos nodded and grabbed the black sword that was leaning against a wall behind him.

"Finally, some action. What took you so long?" asked Greed.

"Sorry. Things were a little different getting here this time. We have Fate to thank for that. I tell you, it's been a long time since I've had this much fun. I only wish we had more time."

"You're the worst, you are. You haven't changed a bit."

Kairos beamed with delight. “Well, let’s go. Micuria, I’ll see you when we’re done.”

“Be careful out there.”

Micuria waved and watched us go. We left her office and walked down halls of sterile white. We came across almost no signs of human life.

“For the sheer size of this complex, there aren’t many researchers,” said Kairos. “And most of them are like Micuria—they prefer to be left alone in their offices to work. You won’t generally see them in the corridors.”

Kairos told us that in order to maintain optimal living conditions for the researchers, the facility was almost entirely automated. As an example, some sort of technology had automatically cleaned my clothes while I was in the shower. Thankfully, Micuria had shut down the surveillance systems to make things easier for us.

“The only reason we’ve got it so easy is because we’ve got an ally on the inside,” said Kairos, cringing at the thought of going without her. I was surprised that someone as powerful as him would need this mission to be easier.

“How hard would it be if we didn’t?” I asked, unsure if I wanted to know the answer.

Kairos pointed to a motionless figure at the end of the hall. “It’s shut down at the moment, but look at that.”

“You mean that bronze statue?”

“No! It’s a mechanical sentinel—like a mechanized puppet that automatically attacks trespassers. Get spotted by one, and they all close in on you. Really annoying, and on top of that, they don’t even have souls. Can’t devour them with Gluttony.”

“You mean they’re boring because they don’t sate your hunger?”

“Exactly! Anyway, it’s best if we don’t wake them from their nap.”

We continued down the halls, following the route Micuria had provided. Soon enough, we reached a control room. Greed allowed us to bypass the locking mechanism on the door. Though he looked like a simple weapon, he was surprisingly adept at delicate work too. According to Kairos, Micuria had granted Greed security access and hacking capabilities. For a sword, he was versatile, and I remembered

that Greed had done similar things back when we had to sneak into the facilities in the kingdom's Military District.

"All right, where to next?" Kairos asked.

His question was for me, the de facto navigator of our team. Our map said that this control room managed the electrical systems and air conditioning on each floor. That probably meant I was going to get stuck in vents all over again. At least this time I had experience on my side.

"Looks like we can reach the basement through the air ducts," I said. "Micuria couldn't find us a route to the basement via any more conventional methods."

"Well, that makes sense. Our destination doesn't officially exist."

Following the directions on the map, I pried the grate off the air vent that would take us to our destination.

"Ugh, it's kind of foul down there. And right after we took a shower..." muttered Kairos.

"Sorry, Myne, but I'm not going to be able to carry you on my shoulders this time," I said.

"I'm going back..."

Myne turned to leave, but Kairos stepped between her and the door. "Hold on there! What about your promise?"

"Myne...let's go," I said.

"I was joking. I understand. I'll keep my promise."

The duct echoed with the rhythmic beating of a huge, slowly spinning fan. Wind gusted with enough force to ensure that fresh air reached the basement.

"You look like you've done this before," said Kairos.

I laughed, "This, uh... This isn't my first time doing something like this."

"I'd expect nothing less from our navigator. That's why I picked you!"

Kairos clapped his hand on my shoulder and shoved me into the duct. He followed behind me, full of excitement. Myne trailed after, quiet as a mouse.

“A bit chilly, don’t you think?” I said.

“Yeah...” said Myne.

“It’s going to make my hands numb,” said Kairos. “Greed, what’s the temp?”

“Never one to say ‘please,’ are you?” muttered Greed. “It’s negative ten degrees and it’ll get colder the deeper we go. You could end up as a Kairos-cicle before you even get there.”

“You heard the sword. Let’s hurry.”

We picked up the pace but were careful not to make too much noise. By the time we reached a dead end, our breath glimmered as it froze before our eyes. I longed for some sort of insulating jacket. We could stay warm by keeping our pace up, but as soon as we stopped, the cold set in fast.

“What are they keeping in this place? What kind of creature can survive at this temperature?”

“This is beyond cold.”

“Our destination is right ahead,” I said.

It was just beyond a large ventilation shaft opening. I cut it open as quietly as I could with the longsword.

“You’re good with a blade,” said Kairos. “Your style is rough around the edges, but I can tell you’ve learned to move and fight through the heat of real battle.”

“I think this is the first time anyone has ever complimented my sword work,” I said.

“Your teacher must be pretty strict.”

“Well...”

My first teacher was Aaron, but I’d had many since, and all of them were strict—particularly Myne and Eris, whose training had been quite literally a trip through hell. They’d driven me so hard that I’d felt like little more than a discarded rag, and they’d often agreed with that assessment.

“What?” asked Myne.

Whoops. I’d been so caught up in the traumatic flashbacks to that hellish training that I found myself staring into the eyes of one of my

demonic instructors. But the Myne who stood before me now wouldn't have had the slightest idea what I was talking about even if I tried to tell her.

She tilted her head to the side in a brief moment of curiosity, then gave me a shove. "Hurry up. Otherwise I'll push you the rest of the way."

"All right already, I'm going."

I made sure there weren't any people around and dropped out of the ventilation shaft. The scene before my eyes—the things that were scattered about everywhere I looked—sent a chill down my spine that I felt through the cold. The whole place was littered with human body parts. A frozen human hand rolled at the floor near my feet. I didn't want to think about what had happened to these people.

"They were all eaten," Myne said.

"You two, eyes forward," said Kairos.

What the... What the hell is...that? A chimera? No, it's something different.

It was as if several chimeras had been melted together and kneaded into an altogether different form. The creature seemed unfazed by the extreme cold as it crawled, its limbs scraping along the ground. I saw faces, hands, and feet inside its body. It was full of humans.

For a moment, I thought they were some sort of core for the chimera, but I knew it couldn't be so. These people weren't like Luna—they weren't part of a functional organ within this creature. They were part of something far more twisted. The faces within the creature cried out in agony.

Myne took a step back.

"Myne?"

I called her name, but she didn't respond. However, one person from within the creature did. It turned toward us, opened its eyes, and tears streamed down its face.

"M-Myne, you...finally came..."

Chapter 25: Entrusted with the Black Sword

“**N**O...NONE OF YOU should be here... This is all wrong.” Myne dropped her black axe to the floor and held her head in her hands.

“Myne?!”

“Why...? They promised me they’d let you go home if I gave myself to Wrath. And I did it, so...why did this happen?”

“Myne! Get a hold of yourself!”

From within the creature, another girl’s face stirred and revealed itself. She had beautiful hair of pure white, and her skin was equally pale, almost transparent. Her eyes, much like Myne’s, were a deep red. I was so surprised that I almost called out to her first.

“Luna!” Myne screamed.

But Luna didn’t answer. She simply stared at Myne, her gaze freezing the girl where she stood and leaving her

trembling. I grabbed Myne by the shoulders, tried to get through to her, but my words were useless.

“Fate, in this situation, what would you do? What could you do?”

“Kairos?”

Kairos turned away from the creature to face me. Was something wrong? I looked around, worried, then realized time had stopped for everything but Kairos and myself. The creature wasn’t moving, Myne wasn’t moving, and even the steam of our breath floated like motionless crystals.

“Fate, I’ve been watching over you this whole time through Gluttony.”

“Watching me?”

“Yes. You’ve gained the ability to call forth souls through your skill. That’s why I was finally able to appear before you. I wanted you to know.”

Kairos put a gentle hand to Luna’s face before going on.

“This creature, and everything within it, will attack us. Myne will go berserk. She will blame herself, her mental state will crumble, and she will completely lose control of her skill. The only thing I can do when this happens will be to kill the creature that caused this change in her. But the results are devastating. You saw flashes of it through Micuria, didn’t you?”

“So that was...”

“I devoured someone I loved, and I sacrificed them to Gluttony. In the end, the only thing I could ever do was devour.” A tragic grimace flashed across Kairos’s face before he grinned and pointed at me. “But! You have appeared: the heir of Gluttony. You can do what I couldn’t. That’s why...I want you to have this.”

Kairos unsheathed the black sword and held it out for me.

“Kairos...”

“Just as I thought. It suits you. More than me, anyway. Greed’s got a foul mouth and a bad attitude, but use him well. You can count on him.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the sword from Kairos’s hands.

It felt good. It felt right. I was more confident with this weapon than with any other.

“So you finally reached this point,” said the blade. “Kept me waiting, didn’t you, Fate?”

“Greed... I thought you weren’t supposed to know me at this point.”

“The memories came back the further along we got. But Kairos had me blocked. Kairos! Why’d you do that to me?”

“Didn’t want you meddling,” said Kairos. “Also, I wanted him to know that you haven’t changed a bit.”

“I can see he was just as much of a pain in the ass for you as he has been for me,” I said.

Kairos laughed. “You too, huh?”

We clasped hands in agreement.

“We don’t have time for your bromance,” Greed interrupted. “Luna’s stuck in that thing because of you. So what are you going to do, Fate?”

"I'm going to get her out of there. What other answer is there?"

That was our first order of business: to liberate Luna from the creature ensnaring her within its body. We'd have no way to save Myne otherwise. Kairos nodded and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Looks like this is goodbye," he said.

"Kairos, your hand!"

The hand on my shoulder had begun to fade.

"It is what it is. Looks like I'm out of time. Once I'm gone, I can no longer control things here. I've been keeping Myne's mental state subdued, but she'll attack you now. From this point on, you'll be entirely in her world."

"The world of Myne."

"It's not a bright place." Kairos gazed at the creature before us. "The darkness in her heart has festered for eons. That creature is the result."

"*That's* the darkness inside of Myne?"

"It is. Her despair, mixed with her Wrath, will only grow larger with time. At first, she might have been able to contain it by herself, but no longer. She can't do it alone; she needs the help of her friends."

Myne was still in pain by my side, curled up in a fetal position.

"I'm counting on you, Fate." Kairos put out a hand.

I gripped it tightly. "I won't let you down!"

With a sudden sound like shattering glass, time resumed its natural flow once more. Kairos was gone, and the dimensions of the basement were changing. The temperature dropped even lower.

"Fate, this is the cold of Myne's frozen heart. You can't get trapped here," said Greed.

"I hear you."

Myne remained balled up on the ground, catatonic with terror. In contrast, the once-passive creature transformed as if it now bore Wrath itself and entered a berserker rage. The people who emerged from the creature spat their hatred at Myne. Only Luna remained silent, staring at her sister. After a time, she was pulled back within the creature.

"Luna... Is that what you want?"

“Fate, it’s coming.”

The basement room began to decay and crumble as if it were aging. It corroded and fell apart, and water seeped through the cracks. With its many mouths, the creature roared and hurtled toward Myne. I intercepted to block the creature from reaching its target.

“It wants to consume her...”

“Hold it back! You can’t let it touch her!”

I roared as I struggled against the creature, slowly pushing it back.

“Don’t underestimate it!” shouted Greed.

The creature reached out with tentacle-like hands and began pulling me inside itself.

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s see who’s stronger.”

Myne had told me once before that Gluttony was the gravest Mortal Sin. If this creature enveloped itself in Wrath, then I would separate them by force.

“Ha ha! The old face-off between Skills of Mortal Sin, huh?”

“Yep.”

I was up for the challenge. If this creature thought it could consume me, then let it try! Its slithering tentacles wrapped around me and pulled me inside. The feelings of countless people were bound within, their cacophony of voices too muddled to understand.

“What’s wrong? Can’t do it?” I said.

The creature was trying to consume me, to make me a part of itself, but it couldn’t. I had never imagined that Gluttony would aid me in this way, not when all it ever seemed to do was cause me anguish, but the darkness of Myne’s Wrath reacted immediately.

Something changed within the creature as it unsuccessfully attempted to absorb me. It writhed and wriggled, struggling to spit me out. Now was my chance, and I called her name with all the feeling I could muster.

“Luna!”

I reached out with all my might and waited for her. Without Luna, we couldn’t go on, and I was intent on making sure we all returned together. Just as I was about to be spat out, I heard her answer.

“Fate!”

Luna’s hand seized mine as her voice met my ears. I would not let it go.

Once we were outside of the creature, Luna stood before me.

“Glad to see you,” I said, still holding Luna tight.

“Ow... You can let go now. I’m fine.”

Luna’s eyes were still trained on Myne.

“You’re not the Big Sis I know, you ’fraidy cat,” she said.

Without a care for the creature behind us, Luna strode toward Myne.

I was worried. *Is it okay to leave it be? That’s the darkness of Myne’s heart.*

“It’s nothing to worry about. Your Gluttony has drained it of its power. The real problem is elsewhere.”

It was in Myne, still curled up on the ground. Luna kneeled down and pulled her into a soft embrace.



“It’s okay, Myne. You can take the mask off. You don’t have to pretend to be strong. It’s okay.” Hers was the one voice that could truly reach Myne’s heart. “None of it was your fault, Sis. And none of us hate you for it. I’m sorry it’s taken so long for me to tell you.”

Luna had told me that Myne was perpetually haunted by her regret. Only Myne had attuned to Wrath, and this had made her feel like she’d abandoned Luna and her sisters.

“Only one of us could ever have made it out of there, and that person happened to be you.”

“But...”

“They lied to you, Myne.”

Tears rolled down Myne’s cheeks.

“But it’s okay. Now you know. No matter what you do, none of them will come back. That itself is proof that the others forgave you. I love you, Sis.”

The Door to Distant Lands was opening, yet there were those who would not return to life. Those who died without regret had no reason to do so. My father had come back, but my mother hadn’t. Luna was right.

“But if it opens all the way, everyone can come back,” Myne said. “I’ve been saving money for it. Lots of money. I made a promise. We’ll build a village just for us, where we can all live together.”

“Sis...listen to me. It’s okay. That’s what I’m here to tell you. I wanted you to know that, in this place, the last time we meet.”

“No, Luna!”

Luna pushed Myne from her chest. “That’s not like you at all. Where’d the sister we all looked up to go?” Luna glanced at me. “I’m not the friend you need right now. You have to live in the present, not the past.”

“Luna...”

Though Myne’s body existed in the present, her heart and soul were trapped in the past, and the two seemed to exist independent of each other. Myne suffered terribly from this separation. Yes, she was a battle-hardened warrior, a prodigy, but she had borne this pain for countless years, and it had twisted within her. Myne’s head drooped,

and tears rained down on the icy floor.

“I’m scared...” she said.

Luna smiled and looked over at me. “You’ll be fine. Even now you’ve got friends who would come all this way just for you. So...be good to Fate, okay? I won’t forgive you if you aren’t.”

Luna stroked Myne’s head. As she did so, her hand began to fade. I opened my mouth to say something, but Luna shook her head.

“Fate, you take care of my big sister, okay?”

“I will...”

I wanted to take hold of Myne’s hand, but Luna reminded me that there was still unfinished business.

“You have to kill it,” she said to Myne, gesturing at the monster behind us.

The creature swore under its breath, but it didn’t have the same impact anymore. Myne hefted her black axe above her head, aiming at the creature.

“You’ve always protected us, Sis. Thank you...” Luna said.

Myne’s axe came hurtling down. The creature disintegrated, turning into motes of light that vanished a moment later. The freezing air suddenly thawed around us. As this world faded, Myne looked at me with a bright, sincere smile. Something about her expression made me want to smile too.

“It’s you...Fate...” she said.

If she said something after that, I didn’t hear it.

Chapter 26: Arcane Eyes

THE UNDERGROUND CITY of Grandol sprawled out before me. We were back in the real world. Myne stood in front of me, horns still jutting from her head.

“Fate!” said Greed. *“Myne’s heart is back, but she’s still under the influence of Wrath!”*

“Then let’s stop her.”

I took a quick look at Shin’s progress. Fortunately, barely any time had passed since we’d entered the spiritual plane. Greed was right; time passed differently in that place.

Myne had no reason left to fight. Her movements had grown sluggish. The fervor of Wrath was the only thing pushing her toward battle. Now was my chance. Just like on the spiritual plane, I would use the power of Gluttony to free her. I contorted out of the way of her black axe and saw my chance. She’d left an opening. I swung my sword at her ribs.

“Greed, take the edge off!”

“Leave it to me. Put her down, Fate.”

I’m sorry, Myne.

The horizontal slash landed cleanly, and the rage in Myne’s eyes immediately dimmed.

“You did it!” Greed shouted.

The black axe slipped from Myne’s hands. Her eyes gradually returned to the eyes I knew.

“Myne!”

I took her in my arms, relieved to have her back. I never wanted to go through a battle like that again. Fractures began to form throughout the horns on her head.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” I said.

“Fate...I...”

“You don’t have to say anything. Not right now. I always depended and relied on you, Myne. Now it’s my turn: you can lean on me.”

“Fate...”

“What I mean is...we’re in this together!”

Myne’s eyes widened, and she nodded silently.

The cracks on her horns fractured further until the horns shattered into dust. Having used up a lot of her power during the battle, she slipped into unconsciousness in my arms. It resembled the exhaustion I felt after using Gluttony at full strength.

Where could I leave her to rest? The city was a war zone.

“Fate, over there! That building!” said Greed.

Looking around, I saw a single ghost gesturing to me with a hand. “Can we trust them?”

“They’re a fellow Galian, by my guess. Ghosts like these can’t affect the real world anyway. I’d say it’s fine. You know better than anyone how strong she is.”

I laid Myne down to rest and thanked the ghost. I still couldn’t believe this girl was able to fall asleep in the midst of a fierce battle. But she was always prepared, even in her sleep. That was who she was. Greed was right about her strength. If Shin tried anything now, she’d respond in kind.

“You did good, Fate. You won.”

“I wouldn’t call that a victory. That battle wasn’t about winning or losing.”

“I hear you. But the battle ahead definitely is.”

“Shin.”

I could hear the gunshots ringing in the sky. Eris had never stopped fighting. We had to stop Shin before he reached the surface, where he could make all those living in Hausen his sacrifice.

“I’ll be back, Myne,” I said.

I left Myne in the care of the ghost and exited. Shin’s writhing body reached greater heights than before.

“Greed, are you ready?” I asked, transforming him into the black

bow.

“I’ve been aching for this. Give it to me.”

“Take ten percent!”

I recalled Kairos—I knew that I could master Greed’s First Level secret technique just as he had. I felt his motions and his focus as if they were my own. The bow grew ominously in my hand. I never lost sight of my target, but I wasn’t aiming at Shin himself. I trained my bow on the translucent crimson trunk from which he grew and probed for the surface.

No matter how many bullets she fired, Eris couldn’t stop Shin. Whenever she perforated him, his flesh simply grew back over those ragged wounds. Only something with enough power to outpace his regeneration could hope to hurt him.

“This sensation!” Greed uttered. *“Fate...you...”*

I had to maintain my concentration. I was drawing the very limits of power from the bow. Then I loosed a single shot that flew like a bolt of black lightning, riding on the current of the world’s magic.

“This is it!” I shouted.

I owed Kairos a debt of gratitude. He’d shown me how to use Gluttony in a fight. It had made me more capable—it had given me more *freedom*.

The arrow coursed through the air, struck Shin’s roots, and obliterated them.

“Yes!”

“Press the attack!”

As Shin splintered and began to crumble, he looked at me from above with an expression of purest agony.

“Gluttony! You’re always...always stealing from me.”

I loosed a relentless barrage of arrows. Seeing an opportunity, Eris joined in, spraying bullets with reckless abandon.

“Damn it. You felled Myne?” Shin demanded. “How? Barely a moment has passed.”

“Myne never wanted this. Not even from the start. She’s not on your side anymore. She’s on ours!”

When I came in range, I took the next opportunity to transform the black bow into the black scythe, then sliced through the red monsters Shin had summoned as a fleshy palisade. If they were created by Shin, they stood no chance against the scythe's edge. I wasn't going to lose to any skill, no matter how powerful.

"To think I'd come so far only for you to meddle once more. Everything was going so well... All I wanted was to grant her wish, and you had to get in the way!"

"I'll do it as many times as it takes. The people of Hausen don't live to serve you."

"Well...I haven't lost yet."

Shin's crimson eyes glowered at me, trying to freeze me in my tracks. He'd done this to me once before when he'd first taken Myne from me.

"What?!" Shin exclaimed.

His gaze once had the power to paralyze me and render me helpless, but that had been a long time ago, and he no longer had the power to stop me.

"So I suppose I've no other choice..."

As expected, Shin turned his back to me in an attempt to flee.

"Think you can get away?!"

"I am infinite and timeless; there are limitless opportunities for one such as I. I may lose this battle, but this is not the end."

Red monsters once again appeared between us. There seemed to be no end to them as more and more continued to manifest and intercept my path. However, Eris blocked Shin's egress.

"Lust, you can't stop me. You're the weakest of the Skills of Mortal Sin," said Shin, his words dripping with disdain and malice. "However, you've given me the perfect chance to steal something from Gluttony for once."

His hand morphed into a blade as he leaped at Eris. But Shin found himself paralyzed. I slaughtered the last of the monsters in my way and saw the red of Eris's eyes as I drew near. She was using a magical eye skill to stop Shin from moving.

"Fate, hurry," she said as blood flowed from her eyes. "I can't hold

this for long.”

I’d never wanted her to sacrifice so much, but it was too late. I couldn’t let her use the arcane eyes any more than this.

“Greed, take twenty percent!”

“Finish it, Fate!”

The black scythe absorbed my power and transformed into a weapon with three blades. I channeled everything I had into the Deadly Inferno attack aimed directly at Shin.

“Guh...”

I sundered Shin’s body in half, and he fell in a heap. As red ichor gushed forth, his lower body crumbled into nothing—an effect of Deadly Inferno. I used this tech-art to completely devour Shin, but no metallic voice rang in my head, which meant I hadn’t succeeded in killing the superorganism. Shin’s upper half still lived. I had at least denied him the greater part of his power. The red monsters that charged toward us suddenly collapsed into crimson ash. Shin himself crawled along the ground, desperate to escape.

“I can’t wait...for another part of myself to awaken... I’ve come so far... Help me, Micuria. I’m going to fail...again.”

He sounded like a child begging a parent. But I knew that name. Micuria was the researcher I had encountered on the spiritual plane, a friend of Kairos.

When I saw Shin like this, my grip on the scythe slackened.

“Do it, Fate,” said Greed.

“You’re kind, I know,” said Eris. “But this thing cannot be allowed to live. Do it for me, because I don’t have the power to finish him myself. I’m sorry. There’s no other way.”

With Greed and Eris urging me on, I focused on following the flow of Shin’s magical energy. His core seemed to reside in his head, even though when I’d sliced him in half earlier, it had been in his stomach. Looking more closely, I understood that his core could move around within his body. This was how he’d survived the Deadly Inferno attack. Now that I knew, I wouldn’t let him do so again.

“Greed, take twenty percent.”

“Finish him off this time, Fate. It’s dangerous to let your stats fall any

further than this.”

I once again initiated the weapon’s Second Level technique. Power flowed from me into the weapon, transforming it.

“Dammit...” Shin muttered as the core inside of him darted around, seeking somewhere safe to hide.

It was all too easy now. Destroying Shin’s core was nothing compared to the hell I’d gone through in my battle with Myne.

“It ends here!” I shouted.

I swung the scythe. Once its cursed blade connected, death was inescapable.

The high-pitched *clang* of metal against metal rang out. Something had stopped the Deadly Inferno attack, but it wasn’t Shin. It was the man I never wanted to face.

“Sorry Fate, but we’ve come too far for it to end like this.”

“Dad...”

His black spear had blocked my scythe with ease, and with a grin, he pushed it back at me.

“Looks like I made it just in time,” he said. “I owe him a favor for giving me this spear, but more importantly, I need him to open the Door.”

“You’ll join forces with something like Shin just for that? Why, Dad...?”

I glared at him. Then I heard a *thud* as Eris collapsed behind me.

“Eris?!”

“Ah, I forgot to mention,” said my father. “I put her to sleep. Those eyes are a real pain.”

“Dad, what are you trying to do?”

With his spear pointed at me, my father pulled out a red stone. It was the Philosopher’s Stone that he’d stolen from the kingdom’s research facilities—a piece of Shin. “I’ve been taking care of this thing’s energy,” he said to Shin. “Won’t you join me?”

“That’s not who I am,” said Shin. “Not anymore. I’ll lose myself if I join your ranks. You’ll turn me into a tool.”

“Then at the very least, what you wish will be granted. There is

no other choice.”

Shin nodded.

“That’s how things are, Fate. We’ll have to put this battle on hold for now.”

“Dad...”

“Don’t give me that look. Let me tell you the truth: No matter what happens here, whether you fail or you succeed, Libra will not change. He intends to destroy everything, both this subterranean city and Hausen above.”

“He told me he wouldn’t intervene if I could prevent the Door from opening.”

“And you really believe him? His whole reason for being is the destruction of those who create imbalance in the world. And we’re all here, right now, in this one place. He isn’t the sort of person to let such a chance slip from his fingers.” My father pointed up. “You can feel that, can’t you? An unfathomable power covers this area.”

I concentrated and felt an energy expanding well above the surface, high in the sky.

“What... What is that?”

“That’s been up there this whole time, but its power was cloaked. Now that it’s begun to move, we can sense it. So what will you do, Fate? Waste time fighting me, or return to the surface to protect your people?”

“I...”

I transformed Greed into the black sword and pointed the blade at my father.

“That’s what you want? I don’t mind. If it’s what you desire, I’ll fight with you until the very end.”

“Fate, you can’t!”

The voice came from Roxy as she suddenly stepped between me and my father. Snow was with her as well, and she seemed to have reverted to her usual self.

“Now’s not the time for that!” Roxy said. “We have to return aboveground.”

“But if we do...the Door will...”

“Your citizens are up there, Fay!”

Snow had informed Roxy of the crisis that awaited Hausen, and she'd come to me as soon as she could. In my depleted state, I was at a disadvantage if I tried to challenge my father. Regardless, any battle would take too long. We'd be incinerated or annihilated by whatever was floating up there in the sky. I sheathed my sword.

“That's a good lad,” my father said. “I forgot to mention: Laine's here too. She wants to see you. I'll see that she doesn't come to any harm. Now go.”

“Fay! Hurry!”

It irritated me that I wouldn't be able to destroy Shin once and for all. I was practically letting them open the Door to Distant Lands.

As we rushed toward the surface, Roxy tried to cheer me up. “Try not to worry. After all, you accomplished what you came here to do, didn't you?”

“You mean Myne?”

“I do, and I'm happy it worked out. I don't know what will happen when the Door opens all the way, but in this moment, protecting the living is more important than preserving the dead. No one besides you can do that. We have to focus on protecting the people of Hausen.”

“Roxy...you're right. We have to hurry!”

“Let's go!”

We retraced our steps with great haste as we headed for the surface. As we did so, the earth beneath us trembled with the force of an earthquake. What was happening on the surface?

Chapter 27: Snow and Roxy

“FAY! WATCH OUT!”

We were clambering up old waterways when another earthquake hit, causing the rocky ceiling to collapse toward us. The surface was directly above, so it was ultimately fortuitous. I transformed the black sword into the black shield. “Roxy, under here!”

“Okay!”

I took Roxy’s hand and pulled her close. The debris rained down on us, easily repelled by the shield. “We’ll use the hole revealed by the cave-in to reach the surface,” I said.

“I can climb from here too.”

“Then let’s go!”

We scaled the walls using precarious footholds and edged closer and closer to the sunlight cascading from above. Snow was silent the whole way, simply gazing

fixedly toward the sky. I’d seen her like this a handful of times, and it always had something to do with Libra.

“Snow, when we reach the top, I want you to look for shelter. Can you do that?”

“Nope! I won’t do it! I’ll fight!”

This new, slightly more mature Snow seemed like she could handle herself. On the other hand, the way she clung to Roxy made her seem like a little girl again. I felt like her immaturity would make fighting as a team fairly difficult.

“I’ll fight with Roxy!” cried Snow.

She hugged Roxy tighter. What had happened to the girl from before who couldn’t stand Roxy?

“I think she took a liking to me because I nursed her back to health,” said Roxy.

“I *love* Roxy!” cried Snow.

Roxy had done her utmost to win the girl's favor. As a result, they'd grown a little closer day by day, and it seemed Roxy's ministrations had finally won Snow over. I wanted to be happy for them, but it would have to wait until I'd dealt with this new threat that loomed over Hausen.

"All right," I said, "Then you be a good girl and help Roxy out."

Snow's large eyes sparkled with joy. "Leave it to me! I'm real tough!"

"You do your best, okay?"

"I will!"

Snow's enthusiasm and warmth lightened the dour atmosphere and brought us a brief moment of respite.

The light above grew brighter and brighter until we burst through to the surface. Alarms rang throughout the streets of Hausen. Everywhere we looked, black smoke billowed into the sky.

"Fay, it looks like they're still evacuating people..."

"Hmm...I asked Memil and the others to act if anything happened, but...there's so many people now. There's no way they could have moved so fast."

People were running around in a panic, following the directions of the city's adventurers. But nobody could have seen this coming. The people were caught up in hysteria. They barely had time to register the directions they were being given. Anybody who chanced to look at the sky shrieked in terror.

Roxy and I looked up just as a column of light flashed. A sound like thunder growled to the north, and another plume of black smoke rose into the air, accompanied by a massive shock wave.

"He's attacking us...from somewhere way up in the sky?" I could barely see it with the naked eye.

Snow tugged on my sleeve to get my attention. "Up in the sky, dropping light. It's just playing around."

"Up in the sky?"

"Way, way up. Really high. So high the air stops and you can't breathe!"

Playing? In a place so high up there was no air? I needed a

translator and I needed one quick, because I couldn't understand Snow at all! I scratched my head, trying to make sense of what she was saying.

Roxy pointed toward the sky. "Look! There!"

"That's it?!"

It wasn't a star. It was something else. At that moment, it flashed, and a gigantic pillar of light erupted close to where we stood, accompanied by a massive explosion.

"Roxy! Snow!"

I just managed to shield them with Greed. That wasn't an attack you wanted to meet head-on. I looked at where the light had hit and was at least glad to see that nobody had been caught in the explosion. But Snow said that the thing up there was just playing. What would happen when it got serious?

"Snow's not lying," Greed said. *"This is very, very bad. That thing is outside the atmosphere, in outer space, attacking from an incredible distance. Even the black bow won't reach it. Nor the Bloody Ptarmigan either."*

I looked up at the sky once more. It was a point in the sky, like a star.

"Snow says it's playing. What she means is that the power it's dropping down on Hausen is just a fraction of what it's capable of. Right now, it's charging up power for a real attack."

Was there no way to stop it? We'd given up on the Door to Distant Lands and come all this way. I didn't want to think it was all for naught. Set and Memil were up on the surface, while Myne, Eris, and Laine were all still underground. I didn't know what to do.

"We'll fly!" said Snow, flapping her arms.

Hey, we're not birds!

But Snow seemed serious. She stared at Roxy. As she spoke, her voice sounded suddenly older, not at all like the Snow we'd come to know.

"Roxy Hart," she said, "if you are prepared to assume the risk, will you enter a covenant with me?"

Roxy couldn't hide her surprise, nor could I. Was it possible that Snow had returned to her original self? Was that the person before us?

Regardless, she was serious about what she said.

“A covenant...?” said Roxy.

“To become my envoy,” said Snow. “Fail, and you will turn into a creature known as a darkness. Succeed, and you will enter the Domain of E—and acquire new power.”

Roxy’s eyes widened. She’d longed for the Domain of E for ages.

“I...” She glanced at me for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll enter the covenant. I’m ready.”

“Roxy! But...”

“We’re running out of time. I’ve made up my mind.”

“Very good. Then come closer,” said Snow, indicating that Roxy should kneel.

As pillars of light fell all around us, Snow placed her lips on Roxy’s forehead.

“Ooh...”

Snow’s body became particles of light that flowed into Roxy’s body. Roxy was bathed in a pale-red light. Then she clutched at her sides as if trying to prevent something from moving inside of her.

“Roxy!”

As soon as I spoke, white wings burst forth from her back—four wings in total, arranged in two pairs. A halo of gold hovered above Roxy’s head, and her blonde hair blended with Snow’s red as it draped past her shoulders.

There was only one word for what she had become, a word taken from myths and fairy stories: an angel.

The divine transformation took my breath away, but now wasn’t the time to let myself be lost in Roxy’s new appearance.



“Are you...okay?” I asked.

Roxy slowly raised her head at the sound of my voice, and she replied with a smile. “No problem. But I never imagined I’d ever grow wings. Do they look weird?”

“They’re beautiful.”

“Well, that makes me happy, then!”

Roxy really looked happy too. Was it really okay just to accept this transformation so casually? I knew it was in her nature to be positive, but I had truly struggled with the idea of Roxy entering the Domain of E. In the end, she’d decided for herself without any qualms. There was simply no stopping her.

“Looks like you got all worried for nothing,” Greed said. “Forever Fate the worrywart.”

“Greed...”

“But being able to borrow Snow’s powers at a time like this? Gaining access to the powers of the holy beastfolk? That’s huge. Holy Knights actually have the genes of holy beasts within them, so their compatibility rate is extremely high.”

“You could have told me that earlier!”

“And miss out on a chance to see you squirm with anxiety? Not on your life!” Greed cackled.

I knew that if Roxy was in any real danger, Greed would have warned me. Snow would have as well. Snow’s voice had changed, but she understood the circumstances. She had even asked Roxy if she was prepared—she’d wanted to see Roxy’s conviction with her own eyes.

Chapter 28: Unbearable Loss

ONCE AGAIN, Roxy left me awed. She was an envoy of a holy beast, and it had made her even more beautiful. She was the polar opposite of the darkness we had fought in the Desert of Extinction. At first, Roxy was astonished by her transformation, but she tried out her new wings immediately after the shock wore off.

“Fate, I think I can fly,” she said.

“What?! That’s awesome!”

Roxy rose into the air. It was utterly amazing.

“What am I now?” she asked, her brows knit together in puzzlement. “Does this form have a name?”

“She’s a Valkyrie,” said Greed. “When a holy knight fuses with a holy beast through a covenant, they become Valkyries, and their fighting style changes along with their appearance. I never imagined I’d see the day that enemies of the past would return as allies, though.”

According to Greed, the holy beastfolk and the bearers of Skills of Mortal Sin were enemies. But with the passing of countless eons, this enmity had eroded. Now the power that had once given Kairos so much trouble was a boon to us, thanks to Snow. I relayed Greed’s explanation to Roxy as she got her bearings in her new body.

She gestured to me and said, “Come, Fate.”

“You mean...?”

“I do. There’s no other way.”

She wrapped her hands around my chest, leaving my arms free, and flapped her wings with tremendous force. We shot into the air as though we were as light as a feather.

“Don’t think of it as winged flight,” said Greed. “It’s powered by magic. The wings are only the medium through which flight is made possible.”

“So the Divine Dragon was able to carry its huge body through the air with a similar power?”

“Indeed.”

That made a lot of sense. We ascended faster into the air.

“Roxy!”

“I’m getting used to it,” she said. “You know, when I was young, I longed for the freedom of flight. I thought it would be so wonderful to soar through the blue skies like a bird. Now that dream has come true.”

“You’re so strong, Roxy...” Ever since Galia, I’d feared that I would be consumed by Gluttony and turn into a monster. “Knowing the risks, it wasn’t an easy decision to make, but you didn’t hesitate. You couldn’t stand by and watch the people of Hausen suffer. I...I don’t think I have that in me...”

“That’s not true, Fay. I learned it from you.”

We soared ever higher into the sky. Roxy loved the experience.

“You’re always so reckless,” she said. “Always pushing yourself too far. I shudder to think of what might happen when I’m not with you. But I won’t be left behind anymore!”

“Roxy...”

“I can’t stand feeling useless! I don’t want to just get in your way, I want to be there for you when you need me!”

We accelerated as we flew. I didn’t know if there was a practical limit to Roxy’s wings. Could we just keep going all the way to the place Greed called “outer space”? Whatever the answer, we continued to climb.

“I can see it,” said Roxy.

“It’s...gigantic.”

We were still far away, but even from this distance, I could tell that it was at least as large as Hausen itself. It would have been no exaggeration to call it a sky fortress.

With the whole thing in clear view, Greed groaned. *“I wouldn’t believe it if I weren’t seeing it myself. It still exists in this place? I can’t believe Zodiac Aquarius hasn’t fallen!”*

“That thing...is alive?”

“Of course it is. Like Snow, it’s one of the holy beastfolk. It’s transformed at present, but...given how far gone it is, I don’t think it can

return to its original form. I'd be surprised if it has a shred of sanity left. That Libra... What a wild thing to unveil at a time like this..."

According to Greed, Zodiac Aquarius absorbed the sun's light from its position in space and channeled it into attacks. In a past age, people had called these pillars of light the Arrows of Indra. Curious, I tried to use my Identify skill, but Greed stopped me.

"You idiot! You think you can get away with using Identify so brazenly?! If Aquarius reflects it, you'll be utterly blinded! Anyway, we've got bigger things to worry about. It's fully charged."

We were still so far away. Could I use my black shield? Could I protect Hausen with Reflect Fortress? Roxy must have known what I was thinking, because she shook her head.

"It won't work," she said. "You've already spent far too many of your stats. If you use a secret technique to stop the attack, you'll lose the power to finish it off afterward."

"So how do we stop it?"

"Leave it to me!"

She was serious. She seemed more confident now that Snow resided within her. She knew she could do it.

"Snow is just as ready as me," Roxy said. "So leave that attack to us, and you concentrate on what to do next."

"Got it."

The Zodiac Aquarius suddenly began to glow. It was about to unleash another huge column of light. Anything that touched it was sure to disintegrate in a world of searing light from which there was no return. But Roxy showed no fear, and she flew directly at it. If we avoided the beam, it would only spell destruction for both Hausen and the underground city.

"Hold on tight!" Roxy said.

As the beam of light enveloped us, a circular barrier formed around Roxy. It caused the light to refract and dissipate into sparkling motes that vanished in the distance.

"What you just did...was that your divine protection?"

"Yes, that's what Snow calls it."

It was the like the Zodiac Scorpion's ability, but even more

powerful. Roxy had withstood the beam of light, and it seemed that Aquarius would need some time to charge another attack of that strength.

“Well, it’s not called the Shield of God for nothing,” said Greed.

“We still need to get closer,” said Roxy. “However, the air will continue to grow thinner. My divine protection can only help us so far. I don’t think we can leave the atmosphere to reach Aquarius.”

“You did good, Roxy. Greed, we can hit it from here, right?”

“A foolish question. Did you forget that you are addressing the legendary Greed? Prepare another Bloody Ptarmigan.”

A Bloody Ptarmigan attack by itself wouldn’t be enough, not for a holy beast. I would need the Crossing to amplify my powers.

“Greed, time for the Crossing!”

“Let’s do it!”

“Take eighty percent!”

I felt the black bow in my hands fill with the power of Gluttony as it transformed. Then I fired the Bloody Ptarmigan Cross. When I used it in the kingdom, I had fired it using only my own strength. Now the Crossing added Greed’s strength to my own. It was a more powerful, more complete attack than it had ever been in the past.

“This! Is! It!”

The two bolts of black lightning streaked toward the holy beast, spiraling around each other. I channeled everything I had into the attack, and it was a direct hit, piercing through the core of the Aquarius.

“We did it!” I said.

Roxy flapped her wings joyously as the holy beast tilted askew, smoke pouring from its body. Then it began to fall. At first, I was gladdened, but then it dawned on me what would result from a creature of this size falling to the earth below.

“Greed, if the Aquarius continues to fall...”

“Your intuition doesn’t lie,” said Greed.

The Aquarius was falling along the same trajectory that we had flown to reach it. I wanted to believe this was all a joke. I wanted

someone to tell me that. I'd used so much of my power to take it down that I was barely in the Domain of E. If I gave up any more of my power, any future attacks would be useless. I looked at Roxy, who was as distraught as I was, because she was in a similar position. Dispersing the Aquarius's huge energy beam had drained her powers.

"Libra even anticipated this eventuality," Greed said.

"Dammit! But what of the people of Hausen?! There must be something we can do!"

The holy beast accelerated as it fell, flames wreathing it when it hit the atmosphere like an immense meteor. If something so big collided with the surface, the earth would literally buckle under it, leaving a crater so deep as to seem bottomless.

"I won't tolerate things ending like this, not after we've come so far!"

"Greed?!"

"Luna, she followed her beliefs to the very end, but all I ever do is watch. How boring...right? Don't you think, Kairos?"

The black bow in my hand began to glow and change shape.

"Fate, forgive me this moment of selfishness... I can't just stand by and watch. Not this time. I won't remain silent any longer!"

"What are you doing?!"

I had a bad feeling, but Greed had already changed before I could stop him.

"The Fifth Level: the gauntlets. They control ten black threads. With these, nothing can escape our grasp."

I didn't care about that. I wanted to know what he was doing.

This isn't how it works! Greed always required the sacrifice of my stats to unlock a new form. But here, now...I had given him nothing. So who had paid that price?!

"Greed, did you—"

"Let's do it, Fate! You care about the people down there. There's no more time to think. We know what we have to do. So make good use of me, the mighty Greed!"

"You idiot!" I shouted. "You always tell me not to overdo it, and then you go and do this?!"

We'd entered the Crossing again. Using it multiple times was an incredible mental drain, but it was now or never, and I would *not* disappoint Greed.

"Roxy, take us closer to the holy beast."

"Understood."

She said nothing more. Perhaps there was nothing more she *could* say. When we caught up to the Zodiac Aquarius, now a literal ball of meteoric flames, Roxy released me.

"Good luck," she said.

I looked down at the pair of gauntlets that covered my hands as we fell. "Let's go."

The flames of the holy beast were rendered harmless by my Fire Resistance skill. Ten black threads shot from the fingers of the gauntlets as Greed took control of my body.

"Sorry, Fate," he said. *"Try to think of this as a gift."*

The black threads wrapped around the holy beast like a cocoon. Then they filled with a magical energy that didn't feel like my own. With a creaking sound, the black threads pulled tight.

"Still not enough, huh? Not to worry; I came prepared."

The black gauntlets transformed. Was this the Fifth Level secret technique?! But this required a sacrifice of stats too. At the Fifth Level, that would be no small amount.

Yet this too was a price I didn't pay. It had to be Greed.

"Fate, watch closely, and don't forget this sensation."

Greed had taken control of my body, so I couldn't speak, but my feelings still reached him.

"You worry too much," he said. "I'm a weapon. You, the others, you're different. There's no reason to be sad. I finally found...something to protect."

There was a genuine, heartfelt joy in his words, and a moment later, he unleashed the Fifth Level secret technique: Dimension Destruction.



The luminescent threads cut through space itself, the unstoppable razor wire shredding the holy beast. Those tiny pieces of Aquarius burned up in the atmosphere. Then a metallic voice rang in my head, signaling the end of battle. All the while, I continued to plummet. The Crossing was severed.

“Fay! Take my hand!”

Roxy flew close and grabbed my hand. We had saved Hausen from the Zodiac Aquarius, but... All I could do was hold onto the black sword in my hands, now that it had transformed back into its usual shape.

“What?! What’s going on over there?!” exclaimed Roxy.

Just then, we heard an incredible rumbling of the earth. At first, I thought that a region on the horizon was being destroyed, but I soon realized that wasn’t the case. It wasn’t an earthquake or an explosion. The land itself was pulling itself free from the world to float into the air.

“If that’s where I think it is, that’s Galia, isn’t it?”

I nodded silently. Perhaps my father had succeeded in opening the Door to Distant Lands. The region of Galia rose into the air. The world had lost its balance. Roxy and I could only watch as the huge floating landmass was bathed in the light of the setting sun.

“Greed, what do we do now?” I asked.

But the sword didn’t answer. The sword who never missed an opportunity to boss me around and bicker with me.

“You unlocked the Fifth Level, so you can speak with everyone, right? Say something... Please, Greed...”

“Fay...”

Roxy held me in her arms. A dam of emotions broke within me, tears overflowing. My friends and allies were gathered on the surface, waving as they rushed to meet us.

“Greed...” I murmured. “Come back, please...”

That was the day...

The day I lost the partner who meant so, so much to me.

Epilogue: Myne's Smile

THE UNDERGROUND CITY of Grandol was full of structures. I woke up inside one of them.

Ouch! My side hurt. It had to have been where Fate hit me to quiet my Wrath.

One of the dead hovered by my side, watching over me. Perhaps the ghost was someone I'd once known. Try as I might to see their face, the details never came into focus. This was not surprising; the dead led an ephemeral, uncertain existence.

If the Door to Distant Lands opened, the dead would return whether or not they wanted to. Then I could come to know this ghost.

But I no longer wanted to bring back the dead.

"I lost..." I said out loud.

The goal I'd held—the goal that came to form the foundation of my being—had been wiped clean away by Fate. What was I to do now? I didn't know, and it frightened me. This feeling of trepidation had a tinge of nostalgia, much to my surprise. I'd forgotten that I ever felt like this. It was a feeling I'd given up a long time ago. I'd chosen to live on my own, as an adventurer, a warrior, and yet...now I was scared of being alone.

"It was because of Fate."

He had said, "What I mean is...we're in this together!" before he left me here and ran off. I sat for a time, clutching my knees, until huge tremors shook the building.

"An earthquake?"

I went outside and looked up at the ceiling of the underground city. Sections of the rock face were coming loose and falling. Were they still fighting on the surface? The thought of battle reminded me that I didn't have my black axe, Sloth. I always kept the axe somewhere close, within reach. Usually, I could locate Sloth by feeling for the axe's energy, but now...I had no idea where the weapon was.

I began to panic, then noticed the ghost from earlier gesture to me.

“What is it?”

I followed the specter and found the black axe stuck in the earth in an alley between buildings.

“Sloth! There you are.”

I picked her up, but even now, she was asleep. Usually, I didn’t mind. A well-slept child is a well-kept child, or so the saying went. But at present, I needed her awake.

“Hey! We don’t have time for a nap!” I said.

I gave the axe a few knocks, and finally Sloth woke with a great yawn. How could she sleep when I’d woken to a situation like this?! Did she want me to unleash my Wrath all over again?!

“Ah...good morning, Myne,” said Sloth. She was still drowsy, her voice relaxed and free of care. “No need to get angry. Are you done?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Sloth didn’t feel the need to say or ask anything more than that.

“That’s it?” I asked. “That’s all you have to say?”

“We’ve been together for so long that I can read it all in your face.”

What sort of a face was that?

Seeing the question in my eyes, Sloth spoke. “You look really happy. Like something really good happened. It did, didn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t seen you looking so refreshed in a long time.”

Sloth was genuinely glad for me. So much so that it made me happy too.

“It has been a while,” I said.

I went to thank the ghost for their help, but they had already vanished.

“What’s wrong?” asked Sloth.

“No... It’s nothing,” I said, wondering if it was just the whims of the dead at work.

The earthquakes continued without end. I couldn't sense Fate's presence here in Grandol.

"He's on the surface?" I asked.

"Then we have to go."

I nodded. I had a bad feeling about this place, but right now I wanted to help Fate. We headed up. I had entered Hausen for supplies, so I knew a shortcut. The normal route meant passing through a gate that required holy beast authorization, but if Fate and the others had come through that to get here, the gate might still be open. Still, there was one other route that might be even better than the uncertainty of the gate: the path carved over long years by water flowing from above. It was a naturally formed path, meaning it was narrow and difficult to traverse for most people, but it was no problem for someone of small stature like myself.

"The only problem is you, Sloth. You're too big."

"I can't help it!"

"Then we'll have to make the path wider."

"I knew you'd say that."

With a swing of the axe, the path widened. Even Sloth could pass through now.

"I like shortcuts," I said.

"Here I was, thinking you might have matured after what you'd gone through. Guess that was wishful thinking."

"I did this to help us get to the surface faster!"

"Yeah, yeah."

I crawled out from between two great boulders a short distance from Hausen. Pillars of light fell upon the city. I had witnessed such a sight before.

"They're being attacked from above."

"Those pillars of light... Are those the Arrows of Indra?!"

"The holy beast Zodiac Aquarius..."

"It couldn't be anything else. But it's far too high for us to be able to do anything."

Sloth and I were frontline fighters, specializing in close-range

combat.

"Don't forget you can't fly, Myne."

"I know. Wait, what's that?"

"It's quite far away, but there are two large sources of magical energy, and they're heading for the holy beast."

"Fate..."

"That's one of them. As for the other...it's nothing I've ever felt before."

I looked up at the sky, glowing golden as the pillars of light rained down. Fate was flying straight at them. Somehow, being left to watch as it all unfolded...I felt abandoned. I was also deeply curious about the person who was with him, and these feelings were new to me. I'd never cared about such things before.

"Myne, are you...jealous?"

"O-of course not."

"I can read you like a book!"

"I'm not jealous!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Grr...I didn't like Sloth's attitude. She was never like this!

"If you asked me, I'd say I'm happy for you," said Sloth. *"I'm glad you've regained your feelings."*

"Happy enough to give me attitude, it sounds like."

"All you ever did was fight. Even now, you still can't quite reckon with the feelings you've recovered."

"Still?"

"Look, if you're ever unsure about your feelings, I'm always here to listen. Well, as long as I'm not sleeping."

Sloth was unusually vivacious for an axe that spent most of her time dozing. She was even known to sometimes fall asleep in the middle of battle if I wasn't careful.

"I love talking about this kind of stuff. Ooh, I'm so excited!"

"Sloth, enough!"

Fate was still fighting. I wanted to be by his side, but I had no

means by which to get there. All I could do was watch.

“Fate...”

I felt his magical energy grow stronger. It seemed he was using one of Greed’s secret techniques.

“He wants to finish it. That holy beast is slow to act; that’s why they called it the Artillery of God. The problem was always its location. But if Fate can get within range, and with that much power in his attack...”

“He might be able to kill it.”

My pulse quickened as I watched with anticipation. Fate always fought in a way that surpassed my expectations.

We had first met in the regions north of the kingdom. I’d happened to be there by coincidence, following leads to the Door to Distant Lands. It was there that I discovered a crowned beast—a kobold—that was making its way into the lands of a holy knight. I knew a monster like that would fetch quite the bounty. There was a good chance I could earn some money arranging a deal with the local lord to fell it. That was when I first became aware of Fate. Bearers of the Skills of Mortal Sin can sense each other’s presence, and it once was said that this is what brings us together.

In the end, I chose Fate over the crowned beast.

From afar, he seemed less an adventurer and more the portrait of a weak, sickly young man. He had a clear and gentle aura, the type not at all suited to battle. He’d looked at me as we drew closer on that road, and I saw that he felt something. I was sure of it then—he did indeed bear a Skill of Mortal Sin.

That was the reason I chose to test him, and to see if he really had the qualities of one chosen by Gluttony. So I sent him after the crowned beast, and I watched him handle it from afar. He fought entirely alone, and he slew the beast in impressive fashion. From my vantage point, Fate’s movements looked like those of an amateur. Nothing worth praising. However, he never gave up. After that battle with the kobolds, although Fate sometimes went into battle with doubt and fear, he never retreated.

It was because of those qualities that I had Fate help me in my fight against Haniel. And though I appeared as if out of nowhere to make my request, Fate went along with me without complaint. But I

knew the reason Fate had left the kingdom. I knew that he had priorities of his own. Even then, however, he followed me into the treacherous lands of Galia. In the battle against Haniel, he overcame his lack of experience and successfully unleashed half of his Gluttony skill.

I thought Fate reckless. But at the same time, I wondered if this was simply a trait inherent to all who bore Gluttony. They didn't use their power for themselves, but for the sake of others. That was why he'd fought the Divine Dragon, and it was why he fought now.

"Fate must be exhausted after facing me."

"But he will still fight."

"He will."

I saw the double helix of black lightning from his attack. In an instant, the holy beast weakened along with Fate's magical energy.

"He couldn't do it."

"Myne, this is bad. We must escape to shelter."

The holy beast began its descent straight toward Hausen.

"We'll be okay," I said.

Fate had not yet given up. If he were the type to give up, he never would have made it as far as he had.

"I believe in him."

"I hope you're right..."

The holy beast, as large as a city, burst through the clouds. If it were to collide with Hausen, the area around it would face a shock wave the likes of which the world had never seen. It would wipe out everything: the people who escaped the city, the people who didn't, anyone left in the underground city, and me. Everyone who looked up at it felt a presentiment of death through the clouds. It plummeted toward the earth, but my heart remained calm. I was surprised that I could watch it all unfold with such tranquility.

"That power..."

"It's Greed's Fifth Level. Dimension Destruction."

Black threads cocooned the holy beast. Then in a flash of light, it turned the gargantuan Zodiac Aquarius into little more than ashes.

"He did it. Never bet against Gluttony, am I right?"

“Yes.”

He didn’t need my power any longer. Fate had become a powerful adventurer in his own right.

“Just like that, he’s stronger than me.”

“*So, what are you going to do?*”

“You already know.”

I hurried to him. I ran toward the magical energy I felt, falling from the sky toward Hausen. More than anything else, I wanted to see Fate as soon as possible.

Before I reached Hausen, there was another great earthquake. It was on a scale completely different from the aftershocks of Zodiac Aquarius.

“*Myne, is that...?*”

“Galia...”

I saw it break from the earth, untethered, and float into the air on the horizon.

“*Does that mean...?*”

“Right now, I have to get to Fate.”

The Door to Distant Lands flashed through my mind. Even then, I had to see Fate first. He knew better than anyone what had happened after I lost consciousness. I shook my head clear and ran toward the city of Hausen.

The citizens were all staring up and shouting joyously. Fate drifted from the sky, carried by a girl who looked like an angel. The sight of him then, even for me, appeared almost divine. No doubt the citizens also felt as though they were witnessing the arrival of a hero, even a holy savior—one who had saved them from the mysterious assault on their home.

Fate was in the middle of rebuilding Hausen, and to do so he had invited people who had nowhere else to call home to live in his city. These same people praised his name as they saw him. He was already

popular with his people; his actions to fend off the Zodiac Aquarius were just the icing on the cake.

“Not going to wave at him?” asked Sloth.

“I can’t... I-I don’t have the right to.”

Even though I’d come all this way to see Fate, I was once again afraid. I was the reason all of this had happened. I had been tempted by Shin’s promises, and I had left Fate’s side. Could I ever look him in the eyes again?

“I don’t know...” I added.

“He said ‘we’re in this together,’ didn’t he? He’s made his feelings clear, if you ask me. Now go on, do something.”

At Sloth’s suggestion, I lifted my hand and waved at Fate. I felt my face redden, just a little. There were so many people, I was sure he’d never notice me. I was so sure. But he found me, there in the crowd, and waved back with a smile.

“He found you too! Great!”

“Yeah!”

Filled with joy, I waved again. As I did, Sloth laughed at me. I growled back.

“Someone’s a bit overeager.”

“Am not!”

Fate wore a smile the whole time the citizens of Hausen waved and cheered, but at times I caught a brief glimmer of sadness in his features. The angel who was with him seemed to know why, and she was concerned for him. When she felt they had adequately reassured the people, she didn’t land, but rather flew straight for the castle.

“Myne, let’s go.”

“Okay.”

I ran after them. The streets were too crowded, so I leaped up onto the rooftops. Some children nearby cried out with delight when they saw my jump.

“You’ve always been popular with kids,” said Sloth.

“Are you calling me a kid?”

“Well, you are the same height.”

“I’m not a kid. I’m a grownup!”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Do you want to make me mad?”

“I don’t! I don’t! I’m sorry!”

“Then drop it.”

Fate never looked at me like I was a kid. I’d known that ever since the day we spent in the Desert of Extinction. When he saw me standing before him with little in the way of clothes, his face went scarlet and he could only stammer. I found his reaction so amusing that I couldn’t help but tease him about it.

I headed to the castle by the rooftops. When I got inside, I saw that Fate was already fast asleep. The angel by his side saw me as I approached.

“You’re...You’re Myne, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“As I thought. You look just like Fay’s description of you: a petite frame with a massive axe. I’ve seen you once before. It was at my family estate, but I only saw you from behind. I am Roxy Hart, a holy knight serving the kingdom. I assumed this form when Snow lent me her powers.”

Roxy?! So, this is Roxy...

Fate had ventured into Galia by himself for her sake. There was something sisterly about her, and I could see why Fate was drawn to her. Still, I felt a twinge of jealousy when she called him “Fay.”

Roxy left the sleeping Fate in the care of a maid by the name of Memil.

“Roxy!” Memil said. “You’ve changed!”

“I... Well, Snow lent me her power...”

Roxy once more explained the reason behind her new appearance. As she did, her body began to exude light, and with a blinding flash, her wings and halo vanished. Roxy was now like any other human, but a young girl with red hair appeared beside her.

“Whew!” said the girl. “Snow did good!”

“Snowy!”

So this was the girl Roxy mentioned—the girl who had given Roxy her powers.

Sloth whispered to me as I stared at her. *“Her appearance has changed, but that’s one of the holy beastfolk.”*

“What?!”

I felt like I’d seen that form before. So Roxy had used the powers of the holy beast...

But to think that one of the holy beastfolk was on our side—that she would even help the bearer of Gluttony. In the past, the very thought of it would’ve been the height of absurdity.

“They are not the monolithic group they once were,” said Sloth.

“No.”

Snow spoke like a child, and it was hard to get a read on her. However, there was no doubting the truth of the matter: She had fought alongside Fate to destroy the Zodiac Aquarius. Now she looked at the sleeping Fate with concern. I decided that if Fate had faith in her, I would too.

Memil took Fate somewhere farther into the castle, and Snow followed after her. That left me alone with Roxy.

She took a look around and asked, “Have you seen Eris anywhere?”

“No...”

“Perhaps she’s still in the underground city,” she said as she started to leave. “That magical energy...”

Roxy and I both felt it. It was closing in on the castle. It was an energy I knew well—it belonged to Lust.

“Wait here,” I said. “She has somebody with her.”

“As you wish, but...Myne?”

“What?”

“You... You fought with Fate, didn’t you? I wasn’t with him at the time.”

“I did. We fought. I lost. But it was for the best. And Fate made me a promise.”

Roxy seemed flustered by my words, and she spoke her next

words with some timidity. “What promise was that?”

“It’s a secret.”

Roxy was dejected by the answer. Her curiosity couldn’t have been more obvious. If I told her, perhaps she would think nothing of it, but it was special to me. I didn’t intend to tell anyone, no matter who they were.

“I-I see. I apologize for prying into something so personal...” Roxy’s shoulders drooped for a moment, but a smile soon spread across her face. “In any case, we should take a break. Eris will be arriving shortly, anyway.”

Roxy brought me to a drawing room where we would wait for Eris. Eris was annoyingly chatty. She had something to say about everything. If she got too annoying, I decided I would smack her with my axe.

Eris arrived not long after we entered the drawing room, just as Roxy had said. She looked a bit worse for wear, but she wasn’t seriously injured. A woman I had never seen before stood by her side. She wore a white lab coat and her eyes struggled to stay open as if she hadn’t slept—a researcher of some kind. Roxy was glad to see the woman, Laine, who had apparently been kidnapped by Fate’s father. It seemed that Fate’s father and Shin had some sort of connection.

Eris asked me about Fate’s father and Shin, but I didn’t know what Shin was up to behind the scenes. I’d merely followed him to Hausen and waited for the Door to open. He had used me as nothing more than a tool to stymie Fate, and even though I knew it, at the time, I only cared about opening the Door. I told Eris as much, and the disappointment on her face was unmistakable. She was already annoyed that I’d ditched Fate in the first place, and so she decided a scolding was in order. I only got out of it because Roxy interposed herself between us and said that was enough. I knew the role I had played, but I was tired.

The talk turned to the Door to Distant Lands and Fate’s father opening it. Laine took the lead in the discussion. I listened at first, but my eyelids grew heavy, and soon I was dozing on my feet.

“Perhaps it would be best for you to get some rest, Myne,” Roxy said, her brow wrinkled with worry. “We’ll have a room prepared for you. What do you think, Eris?”

“Yes, well, that was quite the battle she had with Fate earlier,

that's for sure. I haven't seen that war demon in quite some time. It must have taken a lot out of her."

Roxy called for Memil, who gave a polite bow before showing me to a guest room. I didn't like the idea of missing the rest of the discussion.

"Don't worry," Sloth said, *"I'll stay and listen to the rest."*

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

Sloth was the sleepest of all of us, and yet she was willing to do that for me. I was grateful. I was drained. It was like some part of me that was stretched thin had been cut loose the moment I saw Fate's face.

Memil took my hand and led the way as I slipped in and out of wakefulness. I collapsed in a heap on the bed and remembered nothing after.

I woke with a start. How had I slept so soundly?! It felt like the first time ever. Until now, I'd always slept with one eye open, always ready to fight at a moment's notice. Even if I was at the limits of exhaustion, I was ready.

And yet this time I'd slept like a rock!

"I don't believe it," I muttered.

A voice responded, "Good morning, Myne."

I turned to see Fate.

"Wha—?!"

I hadn't expected to see him. I felt self-conscious, but Fate smiled.

"I'm impressed. You managed to get so close to me without revealing your presence," I said.

"I came to wake you up, but you were out like a light, so I wasn't sure if I should."

"Hmph. I wasn't sleeping *that* soundly."

"Oh?" said Fate, curiosity in his eyes. "If you say so. I'm glad you

woke so peacefully. It's normally such an ordeal with you. That's why *I'm* the one who always has to wake you up."

I got the sense that rumors were spreading about my sleep habits. I needed to set the record straight, and I started coming up with potential strategies in my head when Fate interrupted my train of thought.

"If you don't get up soon, you'll miss out on breakfast."

"Miss out?"

"I *am* Gluttony, you know. I might just eat your share. We'll be in the dining room."

With those words, he left the room. He seemed in high spirits, and I wondered if I had only imagined the troubled face I saw yesterday.

"First things first: food."

I changed into my clothes, then saw Sloth leaning against the wall. Perhaps Fate had brought her to my room earlier. Easiest way to find out was to ask.

"Morning, Sloth," I said.

"Morning, Myne."

"You're up earlier than usual."

"I woke up when Fate brought me here. More importantly, I'm glad to see you two still talking."

"Yes."

Fate and I had fought, but we'd come to something of an understanding. I had started it all. That was why I felt unsure about how to face him when we talked. In the end, it was no different than usual. Perhaps he was simply being nice to me. When he'd come to wake me, he said nothing of our battle or our parting at the kingdom.

"There's a lot that has to come from you, Myne," said Sloth.

"Yes."

There was so much I wanted to say, but I needed time, especially when I remembered that he had seen into the depths of my soul. I was filled with shame. I wasn't ready...

In the meantime, I wanted Sloth to tell me about yesterday's discussion. I wanted to hear about Shin, Fate's father, and the now-

floating continent of Galia. I was curious about all of it. But there was one topic I wanted to start with.

“Tell me about Fate’s father,” I said.

“I had a feeling you’d want to start there. Okay.”

I listened so attentively to Sloth that all thoughts of breakfast slipped my mind. Fate’s father was one of the holy beastfolk. It was a fact I hadn’t known. Now he was just one step away from completely opening the Door to Distant Lands. I thought back to my parting with Luna, the pain of that memory. But through the battle with Fate, I’d been able to talk with her one last time, and she had saved me. She told me to live for her and to live in the present, and I could feel her support pushing me forward.

“Fate...how is he?”

Fate’s goal was the opposite of his father’s: to close the Door to Distant Lands. But he had failed. I wondered if that was why he seemed so dejected.

“I don’t know,” said Sloth. *“You’ll have to ask him yourself.”*

“Hm...”

“What are you worried about?”

“How do I... I’m not sure how to ask,” I said.

“Oh my, I’d completely forgotten. You’re so powerful in battle and so weak when it comes to this sort of thing.”

“Grr...I’m not weak!”

“Really?”

“Sloth, please.”

“Say no more.”

I only knew how to swing an axe. That was all. In times like this, I needed Sloth’s knowledge of feminine matters. I was glad to have such a reliable partner.

“You’re a good girl, Sloth.”

I massaged the blade of the black axe, and she almost purred with contentment.

“Oh, yes. That’s the spot. That feels good.”

I didn't know how true this was, but Sloth claimed weapons could develop stiffness just like humans. I once told Sloth that she was like an old woman and she grew incensed. She didn't talk to me for an entire week. Jokes about age were off limits.

But having extracted the promise of instruction from Sloth, I started looking for Fate. It was easy, as we both bore Skills of Mortal Sin and thus could sense each other's presence. I wandered the halls of the castle, feeling for Skills of Mortal Sin.

"This lewd aura is all wrong. Not him. Where's the Glutton?"

The air was thick with sultriness. No doubt Eris was feeling excitable. She was practically a walking Eros incarnate.

"She's getting in the way. I can't concentrate," I said. "I'm going to knock her out."

"Calm down," said Sloth. "Try one more time, and if it still doesn't work, then you can put her to sleep."

"Okay, fine."

I searched once more for the Gluttony skill...for Fate.

"I found the Glutton."

"Where?"

"North."

"He must be in the courtyard somewhere."

"Let's go."

I took a deep breath and left my room with Sloth in hand. The maids bowed politely as we passed them. It wasn't something I was used to, so my responses were awkward. I could tell by their behavior that they saw me as a guest and had likely been told to treat me with the appropriate courtesy.

As soon as I left the manor and neared Fate's location, I noticed the Eros.

"Grr!"

"Ah, it's Eris," said Sloth. "And it looks like..."

"She's going where we're going?!"

"Indeed. What should we do?"

“We get rid of her. I need to talk to Fate today.”

“And so it comes to this. Poor Eris. She just can’t catch a break. Born under a bad star, perhaps...”

Fate was sitting by the fountain in the courtyard. Eris was watching him from afar, hidden in the greenery as I approached from behind. She was so focused on watching Fate that she was caught unawares.

In other words, she was vulnerable. To think she called herself an adventurer. I had my doubts.

Without a sound, I crept up and gave her a light chop to the back of the neck.

“Ow...” Eris groaned.

It was a good, solid strike. However, Eris still had time to turn and face me.

“Myne?! But this was...the perfect chance to...”

“It’s your fault for sneaking around and acting all suspicious.”

“Damn it...” she said as she lost consciousness.

I hid Eris’s body in the grass.

“What did she mean by ‘perfect chance’?” I asked.

“Beats me.”

In any case, I decided to see how Fate was doing. I peeked at him through the veil of greenery.

“You’re no better than Eris,” said Sloth.

“I’m not doing anything like that Eros. This is, well... Hmm... It’s different because it’s me.”

“Flawless logic,” the axe said sarcastically.

I was doing the same thing that Eris had done. It was embarrassing, so I had to have *some* reason for doing it. I didn’t want to be compared to Eris. But more importantly, there really was something strange about Fate. Even Sloth was worried.

“Ah, so that’s what happened...”

“What? You mean because his father opened the Door to Distant Lands?”

“No, though that’s a problem in and of itself. Actually, there was one more thing that Roxy and the others talked about yesterday...”

“You never told me.”

“Sorry, I just felt it was better that you heard it from Fate himself. But I guess now’s the time to tell you. It’s about Greed...”

In order to unlock his Fifth Level, Greed had sacrificed himself. Which meant...Fate had lost the partner he’d fought with all this time?! They had truly paid a huge price to defeat the Zodiac Aquarius. I couldn’t bear to hear it. Just thinking about losing Sloth filled me with fear.

“Fate...”

I knew, perhaps better than anyone else, how important Greed was to Fate. It was because of the black sword’s ongoing support that Fate had made it this far. The Weapons of Mortal Sin weren’t just important to those who wielded them—they were irreplaceable.

“What do I do?”

“What’s wrong, Myne?”

“What do I even say? I don’t know what to do.”

“Hmm. Then again, even Eris was so at a loss that she hid in the bushes. I think you should just act like you always do.”

If that was what Sloth believed, then I would believe it too.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll try.”

“You can do it, Myne.”

Just to be sure, I made sure Eris was still well hidden, then stood. Even then, Fate didn’t notice me. He simply sat there, gazing up at the sky.

I approached him. “Fate!”

He was surprised to find me standing next to him. “Ah!” he cried. “Myne! Uh, what is it?”

I wanted to make him happy, so I choked back my tears and held out my black axe.

“I will give you Sloth.”

“Whaaaa?! What? Huh? What are you talking about?!”

Fate wouldn’t take the axe from me.

“You lost Greed. I know you must be lonely. You can have Sloth.”

“No, no, the axe is important to you, right? I can’t possibly take it while you’re standing there all dewy-eyed like that.”

“But...”

“I appreciate the gesture. I do. But that’s enough.”

I had thrown all of my wiles into that attack, but it had failed. Sloth cried out as she was given back to me.

“Myne! Why did you even *think* that giving me away was a good idea?! What a shock! I was so surprised I couldn’t even speak!”

Upon hearing Sloth’s voice, Fate laughed so hard he clutched his stomach.

“It doesn’t matter who it is. Nobody can replace Greed,” he said. “But really, thanks. I’m surprised, though. Even without Telepathy, I can still talk with Sloth.”

“I don’t really talk to anyone besides Myne,” said Sloth. “She doesn’t like it when I do. Thank you for always looking out for her.”

“No, no. She’s the one who’s always looking out for me,” said Fate, who seemed happy to talk with Sloth like this. “But you know, when I last heard your voice, it was with my Telepathy. You were fast asleep. I think this is the first time we’re actually talking.”

“That’s because I spend most of my time sleeping. I get called lazy a lot.”

“I see... But when you’re awake, you talk quite a bit.”

“I guess. That’s because my wielder doesn’t talk enough. It’s more accurate to say this is just how things ended up.”

Fate nodded and looked at me. I found myself getting annoyed by how much he agreed.

“You’re talking about me like I’m not standing right here!”

“Whoa, whoa! Don’t get mad now!”

When they finally managed to calm me down, I sat down next to Fate.

“Greed...where is he?” I asked.

“Always straight to the point, aren’t you? He’s in my room.”

“He’s not with you, then?”

“I wanted some time to think by myself,” Fate said. He looked up and chuckled. “He’s gone. I knew how important he was to me, but it hurts to have to feel it like this. To be made to understand it so viscerally. Kairos entrusted Greed to me...”

Fate put a hand to his chest and sighed.

“I feel like a wound opened up in my chest.”

Fate gazed into the middle distance, in the direction of the floating continent of Galia.

“The fight is still so far from over,” he said. “But...look at me. What would Greed say if he saw me like this?”

I took Fate’s hand in my own and squeezed it so he couldn’t run away. “I’m here.”

Fate’s gaze turned from Galia and met my own. “Myne...”

“You showed me something when we met in that world of mine. I was hiding there because I was scared. I found a reason not to look back at the past. To not try and understand how Luna and the others felt. But because you brought me together with Luna, my sister, I finally understood. I wanted to see her so badly, even though I knew I never could. I was selfish.”

“You weren’t selfish. You were doing it for them.”

“Those feelings trapped Luna. They tethered her to this world. I was the reason Haniel was so close to immortality. Luna couldn’t stand to see me left alone in this world, and so she chose to remain as Haniel.”

“But...”

“So, if you still have Greed in your heart, perhaps he’s still here somewhere.”

“There’s still a chance, you mean?”

“Yes.”

What Luna had left me was important. She was no longer within me, but still I thanked her from the bottom of my heart.

Fate’s features relaxed a little. “Thanks, Myne. I feel better.”

“I’m glad.”

Fate stood and reached his arms up high. “Well, it’s time we did something about Galia! I’m going to grab the black sword. I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

I knew before he asked. I knew the moment he put his hands together in a pleading gesture. But he always asked anyway. It was how we communicated.

“Do some rounds of sparring with me?”

“I knew that’s what you wanted.”

“I unlocked the Fifth Level, the gauntlets, but Greed only showed me how they *feel* to use. I don’t know if I can actually use them myself yet.”

“So you want to use me to practice.”

“Please?”

I closed my eyes for just a moment and pretended like I was considering his request. But my mind was already made up. “Okay.”

“Thank you! I’ll be back in a minute!”

Fate was like an excited child, and he dashed off with incredible haste. He really wouldn’t need much more than a minute.

“*Looks like you don’t need me anymore,*” said Sloth, her voice sleepy.

“Even so, no sleeping yet.”

“*Right, right. Wouldn’t want to sleep through your oh-so-important sparring session.*”

“Grr...”

“*I’m relieved, though. I’m glad to see you two together again.*”

“Wh-wh-what?!”

“*You had said it yourself, back in your inner world. You said you loved him.*”

I didn’t reply.

“*Even in silence, your face has gone red,*” said Sloth.

It was true. I had said it. But since meeting Fate again, he’d seemed no different from usual.

Seeing me lost in thought, Sloth added, *"If you ask me, I don't think he heard what you said. He probably doesn't know how you feel."*

"He doesn't?"

"I'm certain of it, after watching the two of you. He's got no idea!"

"Aaaaaaahhh..."

I fell to my knees. What was this...exhaustion? It was a weight heavier than when I'd fought the holy beastfolk, way back in the past.

It was then that Fate returned, his face filled with a smile, completely unaware of my feelings.

"I'm back! Thanks so much for helping me out, Myne!"

"Indeed. Training will be tough today! Prepare yourself!"

"Whoa! Why are you so aggressive all of a sudden?"

"Does it matter?"

I hefted the black axe overhead and launched myself at Fate. He dodged my attack skillfully and transformed his black sword into the black gauntlets.

"I see you've gotten stronger!" I said. "But I won't lose!"

"Wait! Why are you coming at me so hard?!"

"You get what you ask for!"

I didn't even give Fate the chance to use his gauntlets. I hit him with the flat of the axe with full force.

"What? Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

I watched Fate fly off far into the distance. "That should give you some time to think," I whispered.

"I feel bad for him. Makes me kind of worried for your future together."

I didn't care that Sloth sympathized with Fate—it wasn't any of her business. But then, just minutes later, I dropped to my knees as I came back to my senses.

"Oh...I just did that."

"And what might that have been, Myne?"

I looked up to find Eris smirking at me. The Eros was the last person I wanted to see me like this. Had she seen everything? Was there

no time to rest?

“Knocking me out like that... Are you drunk? I’m the most important person in the kingdom.”

“Leave me alone. I’m busy.”

“What are you so down about? Don’t tell me—Fate dumped you?”

I climbed to my feet without a word. My body acted in one smooth motion. I had no choice but to knock her out once more.

“Sorry! I know that was going too far. Wait, wait!”

“It’s too late.”

“Hear me out. All you ever did was fight, but now there’s this new side to you. I just wanted to, you know, bring that out a little.”

“Grr... Is that a confession?”

“Er...what’s the verdict if it is?”

Eris waited with nervous anticipation, but the answer was already decided.

“Guilty.”

“Eeeeek!”

I would hear no more of it, so I knocked her out.

“Finally, some peace,” said Sloth. “I guess that’s what Eris meant by the ‘perfect chance.’”

“Then it was especially mean.” I said, hiding the unconscious Eris once more in the greenery. “She won’t be waking up again for a while.”

With that out of the way, I returned to my room.

Roxy was waiting for me at the door to my room. She held a basket in her hands. When I asked about it, she said she’d prepared some food because I missed breakfast.

“Please, help yourself,” she said, handing me the basket overflowing with sandwiches.

“Thank you...”

“I’m still learning how to cook, so I hope it tastes okay.”

We went into my room together. I’d barely talked with Roxy. This worried me, but it turned out she was easy to talk to. She was beautiful, and even though she was a holy knight, she lacked their characteristic arrogance. After talking to her for a little while, I understood why Fate had followed her as far as Galia. At the time, I had been unable to grasp what drove him to such lengths. Now I could see it. Her honesty and integrity were energizing, and I felt a desire to support her.

“I see... I see...” I muttered.

“Pardon?”

Realizing that I had spoken my thoughts out loud, I changed the subject. “These sandwiches are delicious. They are well seasoned and... hmm? Huh?!”

“Myne? What’s wrong?”

That was what I wanted to know! These flavors, these tastes... I could identify them. Why? What had happened? I had lost my sense of taste a long time ago...

I whispered to Sloth, resting against the wall. “What is this?”

“I think you lost your taste due to trauma. That’s how much of an impact it had. But the events you went through recently seem to have released you from it.”

“Unbelievable...”

Food had become just an exercise in nutritional sustenance. It wasn’t about good, bad, delicious, or disgusting. But to think that the sandwich I held in my hand actually tasted delicious... I was so moved by its taste that I slammed my fist down on the table in front of me, and it splintered with a loud crack. I had completely forgotten to control my stats.

“What’s wrong? Do you not like them? Please, don’t feel obliged to eat them if...”

Roxy’s eyes widened. She had no idea what was going on inside me. I cleared my throat, and then to clear the air, explained my situation.

“Ah, so you lost your sense of taste,” said Roxy. “It’s so sad to think of a life without the ability to enjoy the taste of food. But it’s so

nice to know that your sense of taste has returned. All the more reason for us to enjoy lots of good food together.”

“Yes...”

Enjoy... The word was odd, because for the longest time, I hadn’t thought of enjoying anything.

Sloth saw me lost in thought. “Well, how about cooking together with Roxy to start? You can eat what you make. Probably the quickest way to get used to your new sense of taste.”

“Good idea, Sloth.”

It seemed like Roxy had heard the black axe. “Your black axe... Does it speak?”

“It does.”

“Nice to meet you, Roxy. I’m Sloth. As you’ve already gathered, I’m an axe.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too.”

With introductions out of the way, we returned to the topic at hand.

“Let’s cook together then, shall we?” said Roxy.

“Okay, but...I only know how to roast. Can we start there?”

“That’s fine. Actually, I’m not so different.”

“Hm? Really?”

“Indeed.”

Roasting was all I knew. It was...surprising to think that Roxy was the same. Now I wanted to try something new. And if I became skilled at cooking, it would make Fate happy too. When we traveled together, he was always excited to see the food that was brought out for us when we ate.

“I will cook, and I will craft the world’s strongest cuisine!” I pumped my fist in the air, just like Fate.

“It seems Myne is getting cooking and fighting mixed up,” said Sloth. “Either way, I leave her in your hands.”

“Understood,” said Roxy. “Very well, let’s make lunch together.”

“Roger!”

I headed for the battlefield known as the kitchen, and of course, I brought Sloth with me.

“Roxy, I have a question!”

“Yes, Myne?”

“Can I cut the ingredients with Sloth? I am most used to wielding her.”

“No, you cannot. Let’s do things properly and use kitchen knives.”

“How unfortunate.”

“This is much more worrying than I imagined...” said Sloth. Then, with encouragement ringing in her voice, she added, “Good luck, Roxy.”

But shouldn’t she be encouraging me? I thought.

And so began my first steps upon the road of cookery. I was certain things would be fine.

I crafted an exquisite lunch. However, Fate’s judgement of said lunch was lacking. There was a great commotion, and some within the castle even suspected an attempted poisoning. I was so certain I had made a good meal, but...I was still a long way from becoming the world’s strongest. As a consequence, I was forbidden from making dinner. I was allowed only to watch it being made.

I was bored, but when I tried to do something, the maid Memil turned her strict gaze on me. In the end, Roxy was left a bit flummoxed by it all. It seemed I still had some training to do before I would be allowed to serve any food. I thought about what I wanted to cook next as I went to the castle baths.

“Myne, I really think you should start with the basics.”

“I already know the basics. But my sense of taste isn’t as refined, as it has only just come back.”

“But even just looking at what you cooked, we all knew it was going to be a problem.”

“I was too greedy, that’s all. Next time I won’t overdo it with the

ingredients.”

“Roxy was all flustered. The word *berserk* perfectly summed you up.”

Sloth had been laughing all throughout the process. I couldn’t concentrate.

“Grr...I’m going to become more powerful.”

“Let’s just hope nothing you make kills Fate before then.”

“He’s resilient. He’ll be fine.”

“Where does all that confidence come from? I don’t think that’s a healthy way to put your faith in someone.”

Sloth was worrying too much. Fate would be fine. In any case, I decided a refreshing bath was in order. But as I drew closer, I noticed the Eros again.

“Grr...”

“Oh, it’s Eris again, and she’s peeking into the men’s bath.”

I reached out with my senses and quickly realized Fate was in the bath.

“She just never learns.”

I grabbed Eris by her collar as she tried to walk into the bath. Then I gave her another quick chop to the back of the neck.

“Ow! You again...”

She passed out as soon as those words left her mouth. I left Eris sprawled out on the floor in the women’s bath and was just about to go in myself when I remembered.

“I still haven’t told him.”

“Told him what?” The tone in Sloth’s voice told me she knew exactly what I was talking about.

“You’re a bully.”

“Sorry, sorry,” said Sloth playfully. “But yeah, you should tell him.”

“Yes.”

Fate was rarely alone. There were always girls around him. Today was no different. Roxy, Memil, Laine, Snow...and the unconscious Eris

at my feet.

“Myne, I just had an idea.”

“What?”

“Hear me out...”

I listened to Sloth’s idea and realized that she was an absolute genius. With the floating continent of Galia ahead of us, Fate would be very busy. I wouldn’t have many chances to be alone with him. I sensed for his presence once more. Still alone.

“Now or never,” said Sloth.

“Yes.”

“Good luck.”

“This time for sure!”

“That’s the spirit!”

I took a deep breath and left the women’s bath. Then I walked to the entrance of the men’s bath.

“To battle!” I said as I walked in.

The spacious changing room was easily large enough for a group of people. It was built like a mirror image of the women’s bath. As I walked through, I noticed Fate’s clothes, folded up neatly.

“He’s already in the baths. You should take off your clothes.”

“Hm? Me too?”

“Yes. Isn’t this a bath?”

“That’s true...but...”

When I had traveled with Fate in the past, he had seen me naked. I hadn’t been embarrassed in the slightest. But...now was different.

“Myne, you can’t let this chance slip away.”

“I know. Okay.”

“I knew you could do it!”

I took off my clothes. I was completely naked. With Sloth on my shoulder, I calmed my breath.

“Once more unto the breach!”

With that quiet battle cry, I opened the door at the end of the

changing room. Steam surrounded me. I saw a young man with black hair ahead. He was humming as he sat relaxed, the bath completely to himself. He did not notice as I entered the water. I wondered how close I would have to get before he would. I suddenly wanted to know.

I slowly closed the distance between us. I was close enough that even with the steam, we could make out each other's faces. Still, he did not see me. I wondered why and looked more carefully. It was then that I realized that his eyes were closed. The sound of his humming resonated throughout the bath. I watched him for a time, Fate in a moment of relaxation.

After I took a quiet breath, I said, "Fate..."

He opened his eyes slowly and peered at me. "Huh?! Myne! What?!"

He was so surprised that he nearly drowned. I ignored his reaction and soaked in the bath with Sloth. Fate's face went bright red, and he grew all flustered at being caught completely naked.

"This bath is wonderful," said Sloth. "A balm for these weary bones."

"Yes. It is good," I said.

It soothed my nerves as well. Perhaps it no longer brought comfort to Fate, however.

"Wh-what are you doing in the men's bath?!"

"Is there a problem?"

"Yes, there's a problem!"

"Sloth said the bath is wonderful."

"Oh, did she? Well... Wait! That's not what we're talking about!"

As usual, Fate was at a loss. It was almost as if his melancholy this morning had been a dream. He was perfect like this.

I looked at Fate in his panicked state and said, "Can I believe what you told me, back then?"

Fate looked bashful suddenly, but he replied with conviction. "Of course. We're in this together, now and forever."

Hearing Fate's words a second time, I threw myself at his chest.

"Myne!"

He was surprised at first, but then he stroked my hair. How long we stayed like that, just Fate and I together, I don't know. The only sound that filled the bath was the sound of water dripping from the ceiling. I looked up at Fate.

"I have something to tell you," I said.

Fate said nothing and waited for me to continue. Now I would tell him what I had been unable to back then.

"Fate...I..."

Even though I could find the words last time, now they were trapped inside me as my face turned red. Fate seemed to misunderstand the situation.

"Are you feeling lightheaded? Probably best to get out of the bath, then."

He took me by the shoulders and began taking me out of the bath. He seemed hurried and had forgotten that we were both naked. But I hadn't, and in my embarrassment, I resisted. The two of us slipped and fell back into the bath with a huge splash.

"Ouch..." Fate groaned. "Myne, are you oka—huh?!"

I said nothing. Fate said nothing. There were no words. Fate couldn't get up, because I was on top of him. Sloth probably thought it was hilarious, but for a time Fate and I stayed like that, silent. Water dripped from my hair onto Fate's cheek. The words flowed from my mouth as if they were entirely natural.

"Fate... Fate, I...love you..."

"Myne..."

We looked into each other's eyes as a great cacophony could be heard from the changing room. The door opened with a slam and several people flooded into the bath.

"Master Fate, are you all right?"

"Fay!"

"Myne, I bet that was you, wasn't it?"

"Wow, looks like fun! Snow wants to play, too!"

Memil, Roxy, Eros, and Snow had all come to the men's bath. And they had found Fate and I *in flagrante*.

“Fay! What is the meaning of this?! May I ask for an immediate explanation?”

“To think that my own brother, the head of the Barbatos family, would be in a place like this... I expect a full explanation, Brother!”

“Fate...to think you would go to Myne when you have me right here. In the name of the kingdom, I demand the truth!”

“Snow wants to play with Fate too!”

I knew immediately that this was going to be annoying. I climbed off of Fate and walked over to Sloth. “It’s a nice bath.”

“Who cares about that right now?! Help me out!”

“It’s what you get for your behavior. Call it karmic retribution.”

Fate was on his knees, surrounded by the others. It looked like a fierce interrogation was about to begin. As I listened to their voices echo through the baths, I realized suddenly that I was grinning. Sloth did too.

“Myne, you can smile again.”

“Yes. I have Fate to thank for that.”

Along with my smile, my taste had returned, as well as feelings that had once been all but nonexistent.

From now on, I would live in the present, just like Luna had taught me to. Because it was here in the present that I had my dear Fate.

Afterword

THIS IS ISSHIKI ICHIKA. It's been a while.

It's been eight months between Volumes 6 and 7. Sorry to keep you waiting. I always thought about writing, but it was hard to make time. At the start of the year, work was really busy, and on top of that the coronavirus hit. That caused the workings of society to change completely.

When Japan's state of emergency was announced, my company limited the amount of people in the office per day and everyone largely stayed home. This meant that even when I was at home, I was working. For me, home is an irreplaceable place of respite, and bringing work into that environment was difficult. I had my hands full dealing with all of that, and I felt like I didn't have the time or space to write.

Even once the state of emergency was lifted, it wasn't like the virus was gone. Going to work was different from what it once was. Masks, disinfecting your hands, socially distanced meetings—there was an all-new etiquette. We started to hear more and more about working from home. Everything had changed in a way that was unimaginable just a year ago.

Even with all of that, I found time to continue to work on *Berserk of Gluttony*. But I felt as slow as a turtle, and I was constantly worried about whether I'd make the deadline. I wrote desperately. In the midst of that, I found myself wanting to add more to the story, so I asked my editor for a little extra time. I'm so thankful to them.

This seventh volume is really about Myne. I thought a lot about how Fate would face Myne. Actually, I was inspired at the end of last year when I heard a Buddhist sermon. To be honest, I can count the amount of sermons I've heard on one hand, but there was something about this particular one that resonated with me. I wanted to share it in some way through the story of Gluttony. So, I hope you can feel something as you read through Fate and Myne's interactions.

Now let's talk about Myne. To be honest, when she first appeared in the story, I didn't see her as a particularly important character. But

when she appeared, I wondered what she'd be like as Fate's enemy. I think because of that, somewhere in the back of my mind I've always wanted to have Fate and Myne fight each other. Now their battle has become a reality, though I'd say it's likely the first and last time they'll ever face each other. And in the end, Myne showed that she has feelings for Fate...as it always goes.

I never wrote *Berserk of Gluttony* with a harem in mind, but as the volumes added up, the girls just gathered before Fate's eyes. So, I'm thinking I'll cover for all the girls' antics with some heavy bromance. That's what the story needs, right?

Nope. It doesn't.

I know, I know!

Getting back to the story, though, in this volume, Myne's past was revealed. She's always been mysterious and a woman of few words, but now she's managed to reclaim the feelings she thought lost. In the next volume, I hope you'll all enjoy seeing a slightly different side of Myne.

The epilogue of the story, too, is from Myne's point of view. It was *such* a struggle. A few times I almost gave up. I mean, how do you write a character who speaks so little?! Writing in first person for a character like that is just really tough. I wanted to curse myself for even thinking that this was a good idea; the deadline was closing in and I was running out of time, and yet I seemed to make things even harder on myself.

Anyway! The next volume is the last! I'm giving it my all. I don't know if I can bring it all to a satisfying conclusion, but I wanted to make sure all the pieces were in place for the ending. I've never written anything this long before, so it really is a first-time experience for me! If I can bring everything to a satisfying conclusion, it'll be a miracle! When the ending comes, if you read it and you write a comment on *Let's Be Novelists* along the lines of, "You did good," that will make me happy.

Though I'm happy to leave the conclusion of the story to the me of tomorrow to take care of, I do really want to make sure that Fate and Dean's story is properly handled. It's been stretched out and teased for some time now.

That said, I do like stretching things out, like the Roxy Arc, which went from Volume 1 to Volume 3; and the Myne Arc, which went from Volume 4 to Volume 7. Perhaps everybody reads it and thinks, "Hurry

up and get to the ending!”

But please rest assured: The next volume is the last volume, and there’s nothing more to stretch out!

The manga version is still going, drawn by Daisuke Takino. I love being able to see each new volume. It’s up to Volume 5 now, and the story has just gotten to Galia, which is about Volume 3 of the light novel. It’s a volume that holds a lot of memories for me. I remember writing about Fate meeting Roxy again and hiding his face behind a mask as he fought through his battles. That was about two years ago. Time certainly flies!

I can’t wait for Volume 6 of the manga. Fate is certain to rampage through the region of Galia. I hope you’ll check it out.

Finally, I’m grateful to my editor, fame for all the wonderful illustrations, and all the people who helped with the publishing of this seventh volume.

I look forward to seeing you all again in the final volume.



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